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MARK MAGIC, Detective.

A STORY OF A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN'S STRANGE CAREER.

BY ANTHONY P. MORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "ELECTRO PETE," "HANK HOUND," "THE FRENCH SPY," "THE MASKED MYSTERY," ETC., ETC., ETC.



A STRONG HAND FELL UPON HER SHOULDER, DRAGGING HER BACK RUDELY FROM HER SELF-BOUGHT DESTRUCTION.

Mark Magic, Detective.

A Story of a Beautiful Woman's Strange Career.

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CHAPTER I.

LITTLE MAGIC'S STRANGE ASSIGNMENT.

"THERE'S your quarry."

"The woman in black?"

"Yes."

"And you will not tell me what I am to find out?"

"No. Follow her. Make your own discoveries, and report to me as fast as made. You boasted that you could worry down a case with no further information than that there was something crooked about a party, did you not?"

"I believe I did, some days ago."

"Well, then, there is your chance. I do not suppose there is anything very serious to come out of it—but your investigations must determine that, else I would not put you upon the case of this supposed lady crook."

It was an afternoon at the close of the month of June.

The spot where the above brief dialogue occurred was at the foot of Light street, where the steamboat wharves stretch southward in a long vista of stacks and rigging—the general mooring for all boats of harbor or southern route.

One of the speakers was a tall, shrewd-faced man with eyes that glittered a fire of latent knowledge gained by long service on the detective force of Baltimore.

His companion, a younger man, and perhaps with considerable comeliness, was also unmistakably of the same daring profession; and the two were just then gazing covertly at a female who came forward seemingly at the very last moment to board one of the Philadelphia propellers.

Already the whistle was sounding, warning that there were but a few minutes to spare, since the last batch of freight had been run in on the lower deck.

Her movements were quick and nervous, as if apprehending that she might be stopped by some one, though she did not glance either to the right or to the left as she hastened over the plank and disappeared.

"Now, Little Magic, go ahead for all the thing is worth, and let me know as fast as you can about it. Quick—the steamer is going!"

Already the hands were casting off the lines. The ponderous thing was churning the water at her rear, slowly backing out from her wharf.

Spryly the detective ran aboard. He had started upon a remarkable trail after a supposed "crooked" female. Remarkable, because he did not have the slightest idea what he was to accomplish.

Mark Magic was his name—christened by his associates of the shadow brigade as Little Magic, because he had been known to appear at times and places with a wonderful facility that baffled the understanding of others in his field.

Two days before the afternoon on which we introduce him to the reader, he had remarked in the presence of two of his companion sleuths, that if business did not offer him something more exciting shortly, he would get up a trail of his own.

He required, he said, no more than a suspicion to make a case out of it, and—

His chief overhearing him, had on this day brought him to the wharf, saying, as they came along, that he was about to test his ability in regard to his boast.

A female, a lady to all appearances, had struck the chief, at a time several days earlier, as being singular of habit, and he had ascertained for his own satisfaction that she was not a permanent resident of Baltimore—more, even her former residence could not be ascertained, or her intended course, or her object in coming to the city at all a week previous.

On one occasion she was seen to enter a place on Harrison street, and though the place was watched for hours, and she was not seen to come out, she was afterward found at her rooms at the hotel on Howard street, where she had been, so informed the clerk, within an hour after having gone out.

Little Magic had no idea whither he was being led—what he was to discover; but he had not been on the boat more than twenty minutes before he made a slight discovery which set him to thinking.

Seated in the ladies' saloon, to which she had immediately repaired upon boarding the steamer, the female appeared to suddenly grow very warm, and drew a handkerchief from her pocket.

The action caused something to drop from her pocket, which the detective saw was a baby's sock!

Perhaps the lady was a mother! But where was her baby?

As the boat went churning and steaming down the Patapsco, past the varied and interesting landscape of the two luxuriant shores, Magic was loitering near the strange passenger, and wondering why she did not procure for herself a state-room, since he had casually heard the purser remark that there was a plenty of empty ones.

Daylight slowly faded away; the shroud of night came down balmily after the sultriness of the day gone—and still the black-robed and veiled female occupied her seat in the saloon, while the others of the passengers were seemingly glad enough to avail of the blessed respite of fresh air on the upper decks.

Wider grew the watery space between the shores; darker grew the gloom over the waves that increased as the steamer plowed onward far from the city.

Smoking his cigar idly, Little Magic strolled about amid the freightage in long rows before the entrance to the cabin on either side; but his lynx eyes were on his supposed quarry for the slightest indication of a clew to give him the entrance to the blind trail he had started upon at the bidding of his chief.

The cabin was now deserted completely. Softly fell the moonbeams over the water far out on every side, and the screw churned away at an increased speed as the lookout relaxed his vigilance somewhat after leaving the ever tangled fleet of pungies that are making in and out of Baltimore Basin at the opening market season of June.

Suddenly there came a change—a startling one!

Though bent upon watching closely the game he was pursuing, he was almost too late to witness a quick movement on the part of the latter, which had brought her from the cabin and toward the door out to the after-guard while he was in the act of taking one of his turns among the freight.

A swiftly gliding figure in black, a shadowy glimpse of the veiled female, and she had vanished out upon the way around the guard, into the almost impenetrable gloom cast by the extending deck above and on the opposite to the moonlight side.

At the rail she paused.

A hasty glance around her seemed to satisfy her that she had reached her position unobserved.

With some exertion, she climbed upon the rail, balanced there for a moment, and then would have deliberately cast herself outward into the dark and cool water; but a strong hand fell upon her shoulder, dragging her back rudely from her self-sought destruction.

"What are you trying to do?" demanded a calm voice.

Little Magic was by her side, and as he spoke, he retained his hold as if he thought she would struggle to free herself and carry out her mad intention.

A little to his surprise, she answered, composedly:

"I meant to drown myself."

"You must be tired of life?"

"I am."

She was still careful to keep her face screened from observation, though Magic tried to get a glimpse of her features as she turned partly toward the swinging lamp just inside the door.

"Why should you kill yourself, madam?"

She looked quickly toward him.

"Why do you call me madam?"

"Because I saw you drop this," and he handed to her the sock he had picked up unperceived by her.

"Will you do me a very great favor, sir?"

"What is it? I always like to oblige a lady in anything at all reasonable."

"Leave me."

"You wish to be alone?"

"Yes."

"To make another attempt upon your own life."

"Why should it matter to you?"

"Because it is the duty of all persons to stay a would-be suicide in the moment of their temptation."

"Not always."

"To my thinking, yes, always."

"Not if the person has suffered more than can be borne."

And she added quickly:

"There is a man on this boat whom I only discovered a few moments ago, to escape from whom I would even do the deed you have prevented—my own destruction."

"A man? Well, if you let me offer you my protection, I think I can relieve your mind from the strain in that regard, madam—"

At this second utterance of the word "madam," she interrupted:

"I am not a married woman."

"Pardon. I thought by that"—pointing to the sock which she was busily thrusting into her pocket—"you might be a married woman; and now, since your remark concerning a man on this boat whom you fear, I have thought that it may be your husband."

"I am not married," she repeated. "But the

man on this boat is a merciless wretch, and has pursued me for months to wreak an injury upon me—"

"Let me be, then, your protector."

"It is impossible!"

"Why so?"

"Alas! I fear"—and she almost wailed the words—"nothing can protect me from the man I mention, unless it be death."

"What has the sock to do with this man?" queried Magic, who wished to prolong the conversation.

Instantly she wheeled and half ran back into the saloon, pausing only long enough to say:

"Sir, I don't like your interference at all."

And she was gone.

Nearly in the same moment a man came upon Magic from the extreme rear of the guard, and said, peremptorily:

"Are you acquainted with that lady?"

"Perhaps I am."

And the detective demanded in turn:

"What is the object of your question?"

"Because I am interested in her, and I do not like to see her addressed by any one but friends, that's all."

"Perhaps you are the man she seems to stand in such mortal fear of?" casting his eyes keenly over the other, to note that he was a man of burly build, but of that cast of countenance which so frequently indicates the individual who does most of the fighting with the mouth.

And somehow Magic felt such a sudden interest in the veiled female—who, if he could not get a glimpse of her face, at least seemed to be possessed of a wonderfully exquisite figure—that he wished this party might prove to be the party in question, for a reason.

"Did she tell you that there was a man on this boat of whom she was afraid?"

"She did."

The man laughed coarsely.

"Well, then, I guess I must be the one. And I'll make her—and you, too, if you don't look out—more afraid of me before I'm through with her."

"What has she done to you?"

"That's none of your business."

"A man seeing a lady in distress might sometimes take a notion to make it his business to interfere, though," was Magic's very calm rejoinder.

"You try it, my fine fellow—try it!" blustered the man, instantly. "And if I don't give you all you want of it before you get through, then I'm—"

He had raised his clinched fist rather close to Magic's face.

Without a word, the detective cut short his speech in a way that seemed to knock the unfinished sentence down his throat.

There was a *thuck* of knuckles on bone and flesh, and the man staggered and fell, half-stunned, upon the guard-deck.

CHAPTER II.

A LITTLE DIVERTISEMENT.

SOME seconds elapsed before the surprised and roughly-dealt-with ruffian regained his feet.

Then he dashed up and after the one who had administered to him the quick and masterly punishment.

Little Magic had disappeared.

The man glanced fiercely around, stepping rapidly to the opposite door and returning, casting scowling glances toward the rows and piles of freight along the aisles.

"Why, durn him!" he exclaimed. "He doesn't weigh as much as I do by a hundred pounds at least. I ought to be able to mash him—and I will, if I can get sight of him again."

Under the light that swung before the ladies' cabin the man could be seen to be, besides one of large build, one of those who strangely combine a ruffian countenance and manner which reveal so prominently unsuitable a gentlemanly attire; for he was even scrupulously dressed, and above the tasteful collar and tie was a face decidedly brutish, now disfigured, too, by a slight bruise above one eye.

The fact that he could not find his so recent adversary seemed to kindle his courage the more.

He was about to burst forth again, with threats of what he would do if he could grasp his late assailant, when a voice interrupted from the brass-shod stairs:

"Hello, Harper, where have you been keeping yourself?"

"Forceps—that you?"

"Yes; I've been looking for you ever since the purser made his round for the tickets. Why, how did you get that black eye?" suddenly.

"I've had a little trouble."

"So I reckon. What about?"

"The girl."

"Oh?"

The man on the stairs, who had been addressed as Forceps, started to come further down.

But Berry Harper waved him back, saying: "Hold on. I'll come up. I want to tell you something."

As they ascended to the berth saloon, a face

and then a form appeared coming forward from the gloom among the boxes.

A very dandified young man with an eyeglass on one eye and fashionably-fitting clothes. He advanced to the door of the cabin.

But this had since been closed, and a stalwart negress presented herself obstructively before him.

"Cain't go in dah, sah. Dah's no 'mittance fo' men."

"Ah! Is—a—there a—a young lady in black in there, do you know—ah?"

"Dey is. Is you wid her, sah?"

"No. But since I—a—can't enter, will you please give her this?"

While speaking, he drew from his pocket a card upon which he hastily scribbled a few lines.

"Take this to her, if you please, and afterward I would like to speak to you again," and at the same time he slipped a quarter into her hand.

As the negress started to execute the errand, the young dandy hastily descended to the berth saloon.

He was just in time to see the two men, Harper and Forceps, enter one of the compartments.

Sauntering leisurely past, he made a mental note of the number and position of the compartment, then walked out upon the deck that narrows past the windows.

Pausing beside a window, the pane of which was open and the blind of which was closed, he stepped noiselessly close and endeavored to spy inward.

He could only perceive that the occupants had a light of some kind there other than what the saloon lights gave, and was in time to hear the man called Harper say:

"Yes, I haven't played round the town since I was a kid for nothing. I tell you there's some mischief brewing for us that we hadn't counted on."

"And you think this fellow you say you had the set-to with is going to be mixed up in it?"

"My idea exactly."

"What can he know about it?"

"Now you're asking riddles. I only judge by what has transpired. The girl was actually going to commit suicide to get away from me, when this fellow steps in, prevents her and offers his protection. He meant the offer, too, by this lick he gave me over the eye. We'll have to keep a little closer to her, Forceps; we've followed her too long now to let her slip us in that way."

"Right. For if she does kill herself before we find the boy we've had all our trouble and expense for nothing."

"You an' I mustn't ever sleep at the same time. You watch her by day an' I'll watch by night. I tell you I'm going to have the child, and she shall yet tell me where to find him."

"The most unfortunate piece of the business was that you got on that spree and gave yourself so dead away. She might have married you, you would have been accepted as joint guardian, and all would have been plain sailing."

"Yes, an' durn it, she seems to know just what we're after in regard to herself. For here we've been following her close for over a month, and she hasn't ever given us a chance to get her into our clutches."

"Wasn't she in the cabin all alone for a while?"

"Yes. What of it?"

"Why, couldn't you have stalked in on her, and, by placing a knife at her throat, frighten her into telling you where to find the child?"

"Yes, an' a pretty pickle we'd have been in. She would have screamed for all her lungs were worth. Then comes the stewardess, the deck hands, the purser and the passengers, and before I'd have been able to say Jack Robinson, I'd have found myself thrown into the hold and turned over to the Philadelphia authorities for treatment on the charge of assault with intent to kill. Oh, no; none of that in mine, Forceps. We must play a shadow game on her until the right time comes, and then we may cause her to just suddenly disappear, don't you see? My word for it, if I once get her in some place alone, I can invent a means to compel her to divulge where the boy is. And I say it again: the boy and the money—or the boy or the money—I am bound to have, and that settles it. You turn in. We'll watch her by turns, as I say—I by night, you by day. Good-night."

The door opened and closed, and silence reigned in the little berth compartment.

The dandy listener outside withdrew from his point of eavesdropping a few steps, and shook himself, as if he had just discovered some exertful duty to perform.

"I think I am striking a trail of some sort," he muttered.

The voice was that of Little Magic.

He entered the saloon and perceived the man Harper about to seat himself at the far end of the long table, almost in a position to watch the entrance of the cabin below the companionway.

Magic expected to receive an answer to the card he had sent in to the mysterious female in black, and was on his way to see the negress, when an unforeseen accident happened.

In passing the man Harper, he inadvertently trod on his foot in such a manner as to be quite painful to that party.

Seeing in the offender one whom he took to be one of those simpleton dudes so common of late, he blustered:

"Apologize for that, sir—apologize, I say, or I'll chastise you for your impudence, do you hear me?"

"Were you addressing me, sir?"

"Yes, you, you bandbox! You trod on my toe."

"Did I?" innocently.

"Apologize for it, do you hear me?"

"I'm afraid I don't know how."

"You don't? Then—"

The irate Harper sprung forward to deliver a blow.

Then he was hugely astonished.

Little Magic caught the descending arm, and by a terrific wrench twisted the man completely and helplessly around, nearly twirling him to his face on the floor.

At the same time the voice of the masquerading dandy whispered loudly into his ear:

"Look out, my fine fellow, or you might not live long enough to find the boy you're after."

There was something in these words that seemed to endow Harper with a supernatural strength, and his face became slightly livid with some intense passion.

Wrenching himself free from the other's hold, he grasped up a chair and wheeled upon the apparent youth, crying:

"I'll brain you for that!"

Little Magic was not so foolish as to imagine that the man would not strike with the chair.

A blow delivered by such muscle as Harper evidently possessed would undoubtedly be either fatal or maimingly severe.

A scene of combat was imminent, and the loud tones of Harper had caused several occupants of the compartments to throw open their doors to see the cause of the disturbance in the erst quiet saloon.

But ere the chair could descend, and as Magic was reaching for his weapon, to hold the angry man in check, a voice came commandingly from the forward part of the saloon:

"Hold on there, gents. None o' that aboard this boat, or I'll put you both down in the hold! You hear me?"

The purser, with a stern face presented himself before and between the belligerents.

"Gentlemen, what's the trouble. You are waking up the passengers; and you both look to me like men who ought to know better than to make any such exhibition of yourselves if I may speak plainly."

"There's nothing the matter as far as I am concerned, I assure you," said the disguised detective, coolly.

"But there is with me!" exclaimed Harper, half foaming, and seeming to be undecided as to whether the purser had any right to interfere in such a case.

"This bandbox here trod on my toes as he was going past my chair, and then refused to apologize."

"Oh, no I didn't. I only said I was afraid I didn't know how to apologize to a man who seemed to be more of a bear than a gentleman."

"It's a slight matter, gents, to come to blows about, particularly as it must be evident that it was an accident and one liable to occur on all boats where people are passing one another continually. Why, if I was to fly into a passion every time somebody trod on my toes, I'd have more fights to attend to than I have business for the company."

"He's got to apologize to me," declared the dissatisfied Harper, scowling and speaking with hoarse loudness.

"Oh, apologize to him," suggested the purser, to the youth. "It's a small matter that will pacify him—"

"I shall do nothing of the kind," responded Magic, with a slight spirit of mischief in his mind.

"Then I'll make you, purser or no purser."

As Harper uttered the words, again he grasped up the chair.

The officer endeavored to interfere, and his outstretched arm received a blow from the descending and impromptu weapon which disabled him for the moment.

But with his other hand, he placed a whistle to his lips and blew a shrill blast.

Seldom was it that the call for the boat's crew sounded for help to the officers.

The negroes on the lower deck started to their feet in astonishment but acted promptly.

Up through the companionways, forward and aft they came, rushing in upon a scene that was highly colored with the brush of conflict.

Harper had leaped upon the table as he found himself attacked by both the dandy and the boat officer, and was poised the chair to bring it down on the head of the first who should reach to lay hold upon him.

"Harper, you fool! what are you up to?" cried the voice of Forceps, who just then came running from his berth.

"I'm whipping the whole boat, if they don't make that bandbox apologize for treading on my—"

Further utterance was cut short.

The crew, taking in the situation at a glance—seeing that the purser desired to capture the man on the table—sprung forward, and one of them came toward the warlike Harper along the table top.

The chair came down on the negro's head with a thump; but the hard skull received it without a flinch, and the next instant Berry Harper was entwined with a pair of muscular black arms.

CHAPTER III.

"THE MAN IS A DETECTIVE!"

"GOLLY, boss, you doesn't know how to hit wid a cha'r!"

And the negro held the loud-mouthed and snarling man in his mighty arms, while the others grasped him by arm and limb.

In a very short space Harper was overcome and somewhat crestfallen as he realized that his fine suit and general appearance had been suddenly transformed into rumples and creases and tears in some places.

Forceps stood aloof, contemplating the scene with a frown.

"Bind him and take him down into the hold," ordered the purser, rubbing his aching arm. "Such persons are dangerous if allowed their liberty on board a boat—"

"Hold on, purser, hold on," protested Forceps, pushing himself forward. "It's all a mistake of some sort—"

"Nary a mistake, sir. He's nearly broken my arm, and wants to fight bad. He'll go into the hold until we make Chesapeake City, and then I'll drop him off into the hands of a squire."

This programme, both plotters saw, would throw them completely off the scent they were following and had evidently been following for some time.

"But the gentleman is a friend of mine, and I am sure must have been goaded into his action; he is sorry for it now, I can swear. And I'll be responsible for his quietness during the trip if you'll let it pass. There won't be anything more of the kind."

It was so out of the usual order of things to have anybody thrown into the hold on that line, that the purser paused to debate the matter, especially as he believed his passengers to be of a better class of citizens.

"Well, I'll overlook it. But mind what I say: if there is the least sign of another disturbance on this boat between here and Philadelphia, I'll stop at the first landing I can make and drop the gent right off. Don't forget it."

Harper had relapsed into a sullen silence.

Perhaps it struck him, too, just then, after hearing the expressed intention of the officer, that he was placing himself in a fair way to be turned from the trail after the veiled female.

The bonds that the crew had commenced to put on him without any more ceremony than if he had been a common malefactor, were removed, and the crowd of crew and passengers began to disperse with various mutterings in regard to the somewhat mysterious affair.

Forceps drew his companion into the berth-room.

"What in thunder are you thinking about, old man, cutting up such shines? Haven't you a bit of sense? You nearly caused us to be set adrift and possibly lose forever the trail after the boy and the diamonds—for I can tell you, once the girl gets out of our sight, we'll have a hard time finding her again, if we ever find her at all. Brush yourself up a little."

By the light of a small lantern, hanging from a chain, which the two had brought with them, Harper rearranged his attire, all the while maintaining a sullen silence.

When he had made himself comparatively presentable again, he suddenly exclaimed:

"Durn my head, if I don't think I see through the whole thing!"

"What thing?"

"About that snob treading on my toes."

"What about it?"

"He did it on purpose."

"What makes you think so?"

"Just to accomplish what the purser was going to do with me!"

"Put you off the boat?"

"Yes."

"What could he want to do that for?"

"Are you blind?"

"What do you mean?"

"That same bandbox-looking chap is the same who knocked me down a little while ago and announced himself the would-be protector of the girl."

"I don't catch on. The fellow you spoke about and described to me doesn't agree with the appearance of that dude you just now had the difficulty with."

"In my mind he does—only he is disguised now—fixed up. He trod on my toes purposely

to provoke a fight and have me put off as part of his plan to protect the girl. I see it plain enough if you don't."

Forceps gazed hard at his companion for a second, and his face assumed a very grave look. "If that's the case," he said, lowly, "then there's something more to be considered."

"What like?"

"If this fellow is one who makes up at disguises, he is more than a mere accidental champion for the girl."

"I think it's now my turn to ask you what you mean?"

"The man is a detective."

Each stared into the other's eyes for about a half-minute.

Then Harper said, with a glance around, as if he half-expected to see the subject of their conversation at their elbow:

"Do you really think so, Forceps?"

"I do."

"How could a detective get mixed up in this affair?"

"That's more than I can guess. But I have a feeling that way, that's all," and Forceps nodded meaningly.

"It couldn't be that young lover of hers that she had for awhile before we started in to secure the prize?" said Harper, thoughtfully. "It did not resemble him at all, although I only saw him once. And she must have given him the slip and go-by too, the quick way she left Washington, between two days."

The two appeared to be plunged into a mutual depth of thought at this suggestion that possibly the champion of the girl was a detective.

Then Harper said, suddenly:

"Turn in again, and I'll go back to my watch," moving toward the door.

"Don't get into any more scrapes, mind," warned Forceps.

"No, I won't. But I shall get rid of this man, if he is a detective, you can bet."

"How?"

"You'll see."

"But if he is a man of disguises, you won't know whether you strike at the right one or not," said Forceps, who fully understood the latent menace of the other's remark.

Without vouchsafing more, Harper went to the saloon.

Meantime, and while the saloon was still lowly humming with the voices of several who had remained to discuss the recent brief combat, Little Magic had slipped quietly away from the crowd and descended the companionway.

He found the stewardess at the door of the cabin, both awaiting him and straining her neck upward to see, if she could, what the disturbance was in the upper saloon.

"Did you give the card to the lady, aunty?"

"Yes, sah. Yar'hs wot she give me back ag'in fo' you," and she handed over the same card on which the detective had previously written his message to the veiled female.

What Magic had written was this:

"You had better retire, and you will be safer in the cabin than in a state-room. I know the man you fear and will keep an eye on him while you sleep. Fear not. A FRIEND."

The response to this message, from the lady in black, was:

"Whoever you are, I thank you. I sadly need sleep—not having had much since I learned that my enemy was in pursuit of me. This much of your friendship I will avail of; but trust that you will not seek to pry into my affairs. I am a much-wronged and suffering woman. I suppose you are the same person whom I met on the guard. I thank you and will do as you suggest."

"Aunty," said the detective, as he slowly tore up the card.

"Yes, sah."

"Would you like to make five dollars and at the same time do a very good deed?"

"I would dat, sah."

"This young lady, to whom you took my message, has a sachel you may have noticed. In that sachel there is a small fortune of money. It is so much wealth, that she has all along been afraid to go to sleep, lest somebody rob her of it. Now, I want you to keep a special eye on the bunk she occupies—understand; and here's your five," giving her the crisp note.

"Yes, sah, I'll do it, sah," responded the woman, who had listened to his announcement with widening orbs.

Mark Magic had invented the story about the wealth being in the sachel carried by the veiled female.

But he little dreamed that he was speaking more of truth than falsehood at the time!

And the negress noticed, after returning to the cabin and carefully marking the bunk occupied by the mysterious person, that she had rather carelessly placed the sachel at the outer end of her pillow, though under it, and not altogether out of view because of the looseness of the curtain at the head of one bunk and the foot of another.

Approaching the bunk, she said, respectfully: "Missus, you'd bes' drag dat dar satchil on t'udder side de bed, I reckon, les' somebody might try fo' to steal it."

"Thank you. I did not know it could be seen," and the article disappeared quickly.

"Di'mun's in dar—jew'lry—unhuh!" muttered the stewardess, withdrawing, with eyes occasionally rolling toward the curtained bunk.

And throughout the night, though she nodded at times as she sat on the narrow cushion, near at hand, the faithful negress kept a vigilant watch upon the hiding-place of wealth which her untutored mind magnified to enormous proportions.

Magic stepped out upon the guard and into the deep shadow cast by the upper deck.

A few minutes later an elderly gentleman came in at the door through which the detective had made his egress.

He wore spectacles and had white hair.

But beneath the disguise, without a vestige of either himself or his former disguise, was Mark Magic.

He ascended to the main saloon.

Harper was there, reading a paper by the dimly burning lamps.

The detective produced a paper and seated himself at a short distance from the man, to engage himself likewise in reading.

Thus through the night the hours went by, Magic determined that he would not lose a movement of the personage who was, he now had reason to believe, engaged in some deep plot against the mysterious veiled female.

Morning came at last, and the propeller was steadily churning its way up the broad Delaware, when Forceps came forth from his berth-room.

Approaching his confederate, he said, lowly, though not so low as to prevent the keen-eared and lynx-eyed detective from overhearing the remark:

"There's a couple of hours to spare, maybe more, before we get to Philadelphia; you'd better turn in and snatch a nap."

"I will. Be wide alert, Forceps. She's in the cabin below."

"Any developments?"

"None, only I saw that bandbox fellow talking down there to the stewardess, and she gave him a missive of some kind. And I now feel sure that he was the same fellow who knocked me down and that he is watching over the girl. But we'll get rid of him if the slightest opportunity offers, mind."

"Have you seen him since?"

"No."

With which, Harper sought his bunk, closing the door and intending to catch a short repose before the propeller reached its wharf.

In the morning haze and a promise of another sultry day, the boat arrived at her dock, and the passengers were ready to debark, waiting in groups on the decks, viewing the scenery of shipping about or bustling after their baggage.

Suddenly Forceps felt a tug at his sleeve.

Harper was at his side, whispering:

"Come. Where are your eyes. I've spotted him, and I think there's a good chance to get rid of him if he's a detective or whoever he is."

The two hastened from the saloon to the starboard bow, where Harper said, guardedly, as he pointed:

"There he is."

Adding, intensely, with another breath:

"It's a good chance, for as the boat bumps on the fenders, nobody will know but what it was an accidental pitch overboard. Now then, slide up; both push at once when I wink!"

CHAPTER IV.

AN INQUISITIVE IRISHWOMAN.

STANDING by the rail, apparently engrossed with the scenes and clamor of the early morning business around the wharf, was a young man who did indeed seem to be the dude youth of prominence during the previous night.

The two evil ones approached him carelessly, one on each side.

He gave them no glance, not even turning his head to permit of their making sure that it was the one upon whom they really had murderous designs.

Twice, thrice had the boat struck the pier with a jar that made the passengers rock on their feet, and just as the pair gained what seemed to offer a suitable position for their purpose, again came the crunching, jarring, swaying collision with the ponderous spiles which nearly sent some of the passengers staggering backward.

It might be a question whether the young man himself exactly knew how it happened, but suddenly, accompanying the jar in a most natural way, he felt himself lurched against by others in his rear.

He made a frantic clutch at the rail, an effort to regain his balance.

Then he went over the side head-first into the water below with a loud splash!

But the two had made a mistake, even as they congratulated themselves that the man would be probably drowned before succor could reach him, in the tangle of boats and debris that had eddied into the dock.

At the very moment of their adroit performance which sent the passenger headlong into the water, a pair of keen eyes were watching them from a position at their rear and near the entrance to a saloon, and a pair of lips muttered:

"Pretty cutely done, my fine fellows, but I

didn't happen to be there at the time—assuredly not that time—perhaps some other time;" and the tones were those of Magic himself.

Meantime, a yell of terror that emitted from the lips of the unfortunate traveler, rung above the shouts of the men on wharf and boat, as they scrambled over the lines in the task of mooring.

"Help—help!"

"Man overboard!" bellowed a portly gentleman, who glanced over the side, attracted by the cry for help.

And it was taken up by a score of throats, probably a majority of the owners of which had no idea where the unfortunate was, and knew not positively whether there was any one overboard.

The ever-alert boat-officers, however, did not disregard the alarm. There was a rush for the side upon which arose still the shout for help by some one in the water.

Several lines were thrown to the struggling man.

But another was ahead of them in the effort to save a human from drowning. Out from the stern of a small yacht sprung a half-stripped form that swam boldly amid the debris and clutched the garments of the imperiled one.

Imperiled, for by the swerving motion of the steamer and the fact of the presence of many smaller craft at her side, it was possible that the humans beneath might at any moment be crushed to death.

A bold swimmer it was, though, for he dragged the other easily as if he had been a floating cork to the stern of the yacht, where ready hands grasped them and drew them up to safety.

The murderous plotters did not pause to see whether their attempt had been successful or not.

Harper had immediately said:

"Come, we must be below when the gang-plank is run out, or the girl may make a landing so far ahead of us that we shall lose her in the crowd."

As they disappeared down the companionway, Magic, in his disguise as the little old gentleman, slipped into one of the state-rooms, the key of which had been left in the door by the recent occupant, who now had no further use for it.

Within less than the space of a minute a rather singular-looking female came forth from the state-room and hastened down to the freight deck.

She was a buxom specimen of the farmer's wife, and Irish at that, as her peculiar attire indicated and the lines of her face betrayed.

Nearing the space before the cabin whence the plank was to be run out, she stepped immediately up to the black-dressed and veiled female that has taken a mysterious part so far in our narrative.

This party now carried a sachel in one hand and a larger sachel that was almost a good-sized valise in the other.

"Ye're strainin' av yer narves, miss, d'ye moind, with thim two thrunks a-draggin' av ye down."

"Oh, no, I do not mind it," was the reply, a little shrinkingly.

"An' here I am, d'ye see, with nary a thing av me own to carry, an' so I'll just be afther givin' ye a bit av a lift, so I will."

"Oh, never mind—"

"Tush! Don't ye moind what I'm a-sayin' when I tell ye I'm the head av me own house intil the kentry back in Maryland, where me ould man's too weak to lift much an' many's the toime I've carrit me own thrunk down to the shteamboat landin', I have," and as she spoke, and in such a way that the veiled female seemed unable to resist, the seemingly well-intentioned woman reached and took the heavier sachel from the former's hand, insisting upon carrying it.

"Maybe ye've a long ways to go intil the city, an' I'll be givin' ye a little bit av a lift, just, d'ye moind, that'll make the thravel easier. D'ye know much about the city, miss, or are ye a shtrangler here?"

No response.

"If ye've no knowin' of where ye are a-goin maybe I can help ye a bit, af ye'll tell me who ye're wantin' to find."

"As long as you are so kind," came the evasive response now, "if you will only help me to the street cars with that sachel, I shall be very grateful."

"Certainly I will that, miss, an' glad to do it. Now, then, be careful that ye're not gettin' seppyrated from me, d'ye moind," cautioned the woman, as the increasing crowd now began to sway forward to the plank where the crew were standing with it partly raised and ready to run out.

Another moment and there was a slapping crash of the heavy planks on the wharf and the crowd surged across, the Irishwoman keeping close to the companion she had insisted upon making for herself, and carrying the large sachel as if it was no more than a feather's weight.

Harper and Forceps were close behind the two as they hurried off along the wharf.

"Will ye abject to tellin' me yer name?" inquired the Irishwoman, as she and the mysterious young lady were proceeding westward in an Arch street car.

For at the car, she had insisted that her own route required her to take that very car, so she might as well continue to assist with the heavy valise.

"My name is—is Julia Diering," replied the other, with some hesitancy.

"It's a very agreeable name ye have. Mine's Bridget McPatrick, an' I'm Irish, though I'm American born. An' where are ye goin' might I ask?"

The question seemed to arouse a feeling of impatience or uneasiness in the person of the veiled female.

Her companion was, she thought, very accommodating to assume the carrying of the heavy valise, but her questions were growing to be somewhat of an annoyance.

"I am going to see some friends—"

"An' where do they live?" came another question, almost before the first reply was finished.

"On South Sixth street."

"Ye don't say! Look a' that! Whoy it's there I'm goin' meself this blessid minute. An' how far down Sixth street are ye goin', now?"

"Nearly to South street. That is all I can tell you," was answered in a way that meant to convey the announcement of an unwillingness to give any further information.

"South street, is it? Whoy, look a' that! An' sure it's not far from that same South street me own husband's brother lives—Michael McPatrick, that is—an' betide it's meself made a mon av'im an' put the money intil his pocket when I marrit Dennis McPatrick an' bought the farrum—"

"Will you please let me out at South street?" here interrupted the voice of the veiled female, addressing the conductor of the second and cross-line car which they had entered during the dialogue.

"Yes, miss."

The Irishwoman became silent after this.

Before a millinery shop near the corner of South street, the young lady who had called herself Julia Diering started to alight.

"Is it here ye're gittin' out?" asked Mrs. McPatrick.

"Yes."

But as she reached to take up her valise, the Irishwoman said:

"L'ave it alone until we're on the pavement or intil the house, an' I'll carry it still for yees. Be me sowl; it's a strange thing, for here's where I'm a-goin' to get out meself. Me brother-in-law's house is just round the corner beyant, an' I've not far to go," and with the valise persistently in hand, she followed Miss Julia Diering from the car.

At the side-door to the millinery shop, the veiled lady rung the bell—a summons that was answered by a large-built and kindly-faced lady.

"Is this Mrs. Duffy?" inquired the caller.

"I am."

"My name is Julia Diering. I am from Baltimore."

"Oh, come in. I expected you to-day, but hardly as early as this. I am glad to see you. And we shall need you to-day on work, if you think you are not too tired to commence at once."

They entered the hallway—the Irishwoman keeping close.

And when inside, Mrs. McPatrick said:

"I'll thank yees for a glass av wather, av ye please."

"This lady has kindly assisted me with my valise," said Julia Diering, in explanation to the glance bestowed upon Mrs. McPatrick by the proprietress of the millinery shop.

"Just step this way, Miss Diering, and I'll introduce you to my forewoman, while I send a glass of water to this lady."

"I am very much obliged to you," Julia said, pausing for a moment before Mrs. McP. and taking up the valise which had been the cause of their brief acquaintance.

"It's very welcome ye are."

The proprietress and her new employee—for it was evident that Julia Diering had come there to be employed—departed to a room at the far rear of the hallway.

But Mrs. McPatrick did not want a glass of water.

No sooner had they vanished from sight than she performed a remarkable transformation feat.

The female attire suddenly and utterly disappeared, and out of the combination of furbelows and skirts emerged Little Magic!

Hastily he stepped to the door, and in his own proper person emerged upon the street—

Just in time to observe the two men, Forceps and Harper—who had evidently spotted the house into which their quarry had entered—turning the near corner.

"I think the matter is taking some shape," muttered the detective, starting to follow the evil couple. "I have ascertained the name of the girl, but I have not yet had a glimpse of her face. I have learned that these two beau-

ties calling each other Harper and Forceps, are working some game against the girl, in which there is a boy, to find whom seems to be the principal object, for there is a hint of money in such a find. I don't think the girl is a crook; but I do think that I am on the track of a pair of crooks in Harper and Forceps. Let us see what will come of it."

The two men did not cast a backward glance after entering South street and moving slowly eastward.

At a low rum-shop they paused and then went in apparently for a drink.

Owing to the warm weather, the door was wide open, with a green screen across.

Magic gained a point near enough to hear a mutual exchange of salutations between the comers and the proprietor, and a few seconds later ascertained that all were old acquaintances and the comers from Baltimore were asking about taking a room as a sleeping apartment.

Satisfied that he knew where the villains would make their stopping-place, he entered another restaurant on the opposite side of the street, from which he presently came forth, in the guise of a little old gentleman which we have seen him assume on the boat.

In this attire, he sought the millinery shop of Mrs. Duffy, entering as if he was on business bent.

Two females were in the shop—Mrs. Duffy for one, and the other about the most beautiful girl, he thought, he had ever seen.

CHAPTER V.

THREE ROGUES IN COUNCIL.

THE place entered by the two men, Berry Harper and Forceps, was one of the lowest of low dives that abound along that particular vicinity of South street.

Behind the sloppy bar was a man with rubicund countenance and sluggish eyes, with his sleeves rolled up and head tossed back in a sort of bravado style—tossed back a little more, as he instantly cried, harshly:

"Why, hullo! Forceps, my lark, where'd you drop from?"

The two shook hands over the almost threadbare counter of mixed dark paint and white splotches, showing that there was at certain times considerable business transacted there.

"Sandy, my old partner, we've landed in town on a blazin' racket, we have. This here's my true friend, Berry Harper. A regular, he is; but a little out just now, you fly—"

"Shake," interrupted the broad and red-faced Sandy, extending his arm and hand toward Harper. "An' take somethin' with me. I'm allus powerful glad to see anybody what's a friend o' my old pal here, Forceps. Him an' me's been on many a sail together, we have, an' a heap we seen before I quit off such business an' settled down to make a' honest livin'."

While speaking, he was setting out the decanter and bottles, adding, as he placed the latter before them:

"You'll find that the genuine thing, an' no mistake. I don't deal it out to customers; it's my own private bottle, that is."

He seemed to be in high good-humor over this unexpected visit from Forceps, and was equally gracious toward his friend.

He grinned hugely as he poured for himself a drink, during a moment's silence; and then the three imbibed.

Forceps wiped his mouth and said:

"We're going to stop over with you for a couple of days."

"That's all right. I've got just the daisy of a room for you."

"Private?"

"You bet. Why, d'you suppose I'd give any pard o' mine a public room, what had business to talk an' plans to fix fer the campaign in town? Oh, no! I ain't that kind o' man, an' you know it, Forceps, you do."

Sandy came out from behind his bar and, with a jerky nod ahead, led the way to a greasy back door and up a narrow flight of stairs to a small room in the second-story.

Besides being small, it lacked ventilation to a sufficient degree, and the atmosphere was anything but pleasant.

"How'll this do?" he queried.

"First class," replied Forceps, sending his hat onto the dirty bed with a twirl, and proceeding to remove his coat.

"Been traveling?" Sandy inquired.

"All night on a cussed little narrow-decked steamboat, where a feller couldn't turn around both ways at once without bumpin' his nose."

"Then I reckon you two want to turn in an' take a snooze?"

"Nary a snooze—and, Sandy—" as the proprietor turned to leave them.

"Well, what'll it be?" as he thought Forceps wanted to order a fresh lot of drinks.

"Hold on a minute," waving one hand toward a chair.

Harper threw himself into a seat and permitted Forceps to do all the talking.

"I want to have a little talk with you, Sandy."

"Oh, all right."

"How is business?"

"Well, I must say I'm a-doin' a little down in the bar, 'ticularly when some suckers comes in to play keards an' gits soaked till they don't know whether change comes to 'em straight or not—"

"Oh, I don't mean that," Forceps broke in, with a sly nod.

Sandy remained silent for perhaps a second. Then he said:

"An' there's nothin' much t'other way just now. Things is purty nigh down into a hole, the detective chaps hes us all spotted so fine—Wait a minute."

He arose and stepped to the forward part of the room. Kneeling, he applied his eye to a large knot-hole in the floor.

From this hole he could overlook the whole bar-room.

"Come forward a little," he requested, "so as I can keep a eye onto the counter. I ain't never busy this time o' day, but I have to keep a lookout all the same, else some nigger from the alleys round here'll take a opportunity to skip inside an' help hisself."

That which Forceps had to say was in part of a programme suggested by him to Harper as they were on their way to the low saloon. He deemed it prudent to say it, too, at close quarters.

Drawing forward his chair to Sandy's side, he continued:

"Then, if you are not doing much yourself, I suppose you wouldn't object to an old friend getting you into something?"

"Don't know so much 'bout that," was the wary reply. "You see"—and he talked as freely to the man who was evidently an old and crooked pal of his, as if the third party, Harper, had not been present—"you see, I've been up since you an' I met last."

"What!—you've been in the jug?"

"You just bet I have, an' a big one, too. Why, I ain't been out o' Moyamensing fer more'n a month."

Forceps expressed his surprise.

"And the way I have to do it now," the rogue pursued, "is for to let the gang make my rooms here a sort o' head-quarters, an' I git a share in the boodle what comes in fer doin' of it. But, as I said, there ain't much doin' that-a-way just about now; the detec's are buzzin' it lively as bees, an' it's on'y oncet in a spell 'at any o' my boys makes a haul. There's Dandy, the Bolt-twister, an' Hotel Harry, an' Boardin'-house Sal, an' a lot more what allus used to keep up a good thing of it—they're laid up sorter fer repairs an' shade fer their health while the cops are thick, as I said. No, I ain't doin' much; fact is, I daren't do anything myself. I'd be pulled in less'n no time—"

"But, Sandy, what I want to open up to you is right in your line; you don't have to do a thing, except to help an old pard on the way of doing the business. You don't show up at all, until time for the divvy."

"What kind of a racket are you makin'?"

"Well, we're going to bring a beautiful girl here an' keep her shut up until she tells us just where to look for a pile of wealth she's got hidden somewhere. We've been off and on her track for a long spell, now; we know our game thoroughly. We can spring a thumb-screw on to her which will be sure to bring out all the information we want. After we get it, why, she can be let go wherever she wants to—we needn't care—"

"Let go?"

"Yes."

"An' durin' the time you're a-workin' the news outer her, she's kept here in my place, eh?"

"That's it."

"Say, old pard, did I ever do anything to make you think I was a fu'st-class fool?"

"Oh, no, Sandy!"

"An' you want to make a trap o' my place, git the money, or whatever it may be, an' then let her bring the whole population o' policemen right down onto me! Why, what are you talkin' about?"

Forceps laughed lowly. Harper grunted.

"I've thought all that out," said the former. "When we've got what we want and the girl's let go, you—and neither of us, either—will be around these diggin's."

"You mean it'll pay me to close up an' git?"

"You've struck it first time, Sandy."

"It'll take some hundreds in hard cash for to induce me to do that thing," the barkeeper remarked, eying his *vis-a-vis* to see the effect of the declaration.

Again Forceps laughed.

"Hundreds!" he exclaimed in disdain. "Why, old man, we're going to give you thousands, if you'll go in all square and for all you can. It won't take any money at all on your side, either."

"How much is in the thing, anyhow?"

"Here's the case, straight as a shroud-rope: My friend, here, was on the point of being married to the girl, when she up an' scooted, giving him the mitten. Now she has, somewhere in these United States, more diamonds than you and I could carry in a bag."

"Git out!" broke from Sandy, incredulously. "Oh, it's a fact! I am not making up anything for fun; I haven't got the time. We've been on the lookout for a chance to bag her and confine her somewhere. I say we have the thumb-screw that will make her talk, once we get her stowed away. She's bound to tell us; she can't refuse. But I needn't give the reasons to you. Depend on what I'm saying as a fact, and no mistake in the programme. The truth is, Harper, here, and I must confess to being a little down at the heel. We haven't tools nor anything else to carry out our little plan. You just set us up with the necessities, and my word for it, in less time than a week you'll be glad enough to get out of the country, with a sachel full of diamonds as your share in the proceedings."

"About how much do you reckon the diamonds will mount up to—the whole pile 'at you're after?"

"Something like a million, I guess."

"Do you know it fer a fact?"

"Yes. Isn't it so, Berry?" turning to his companion for an indorsement of the almost fabulous assertion.

"What Forceps says is so, every word," responded Harper, impressively. "When I had the honor of enjoying the young lady's society, I actually saw her deposit in a safety-vault, in Washington, several bags of diamonds, the contents being examined before my own eyes by the receiver at the vault."

"An' what'll my share be?" queried the red-faced rogue.

"Diamonds to the amount of ten thousand dollars," replied Forceps, with the air of a man who feels that he is making a splendid offer.

Sandy seemed to be satisfied.

"Open the thing wide," he urged. "Let us hear just what it is you want me to do."

"First, have you any room where she could be shut up until she gives in to us?"

"I have a cemented basement what only has one door, an' that lets out into the area way of the yard. It's a powerful strong door; an' there ain't no windows at the front, so she couldn't make any noise 'at would be heard outside. We c'd fix the place up like a room, an' as you say it won't be long before she gives in, it'll do fer the occasion, I guess."

"Yes, that will do. Then we want a good set of tools—you know."

"You mean fer to break into a house with?"

"Exactly."

"Reckon I kin find 'em. There's a lot been layin' roun' here just gittin' rusty fer the want o' use, 'cause o' the reasons I shouted to you a minute ago."

"That's good. So far all well. Now we want a supply of chloroform and a stout, large bag."

Sandy eyed the speaker inquiringly.

"Those are for the girl," Forceps explained. "We chloroform her first, then slip her into the bag and bring her here—"

"Why, do you reckon you c'd walk far with that there load without bein' stopped by the police, at the hour o' the night 'at you want to be a-doin' this thing?" exclaimed the saloon-keeper, staring at Forceps as if he thought he was about to deliberately put his neck in limbo.

"My dear Sandy, I've thought out that part of it, too. The house we're going to break into isn't a stone's throw from here, and unless I'm very much mistaken, I saw, as I came in, that the alley which runs up alongside your house leads to the alley-gate of the house we're working. You see, it's all plain sailing; we just bag the girl an' run her into your basement without showing ourselves on the street at all. All we want is the necessary outfit for the carrying out of the programme, a hole to put the girl in; then, as I say, within less than a week you will have enough to warrant your closing up the den and making yourself scarce."

Forceps's explanation seemed to satisfy the man, who had in times past, when the two plied a nefarious calling together, looked upon Forceps as a superior genius for plotting.

"I reckon it's all right," he said, "if things work as you've got 'em down. When do you want to start out?"

"That is something that we can't say until we have done a little spying. But you'll do your part, eh?"

"Yes, I reckon so. I'll git the things fer you an' have 'em ready for you against night."

"Good for you, old man. And now, set 'em up. Let's take something to celebrate the little arrangement."

Sandy departed to bring up the required liquor.

"Can you rely on him?" Harper asked.

"Every time. I guess he's keeping mighty shady since he got out of Moyamensing, where he says he's been; but in this he sees a chance to enrich himself without much show of exposure."

The rogue was not long gone.

A few minutes later the villainous trio were partaking of the fiery beverage which was set before them on the rough pine table.

CHAPTER VI.

MAGIC AND HIS BEAUTIFUL MYSTERY.

THE young lady with Mrs. Duffy at the time the disguised Magic entered the millinery-shop was a brunette of an almost peculiarly attractive type.

Her eyes were large, of hazel hue and liquidly lustrous; her complexion nearly faultless in purity and not of that darkness which generally accompanies the type of brunette.

Ears, mouth and nostrils, it seemed to the beholder, were more like carvings from some exquisitely tinted and contoured shell; the lips invitingly pretty and notably having a pressure of firmness about them that appeared to be the only blemish to a complete repose of every feature.

Mrs. Duffy was at the moment explaining something to her new employee concerning the boxed goods upon the shelves; the young girl evidently being intended for the counter business of the fashionable and well-patronized establishment.

"I would like to buy some ribbon," said the little old gentleman, advancing to the counter.

Mrs. Duffy whispered to the girl:

"Here is an opportunity for you to show what you know about ribbons, as you told me you were well informed in that line, and to see whether you remember the method for calculating prices which I explained."

With this, she withdrew.

"What kind of ribbon will you have, sir?"

"Oh, 'most any kind, so long as it is broad enough for a child's sash and contains sufficient."

"What is the complexion of your child?"

Being informed of several points regarding the child for whom the ribbon was intended, the new and beautiful clerk soon made a satisfactory selection and wrapped up the desired quantity.

As she handed the small bundle over the counter, she was gazing hard into the face of her customer, and Magic felt an involuntary thrill, despite his trained nerves, under the influence of her lovely orbs.

"Will you tell me why you are following me?" came the unexpected and astonishing question from the exquisite mouth.

"Following you?"

"Yes. Why are you determined to be near me? What is your object? You cannot deceive me," and Magic saw that besides the firm lines around her lips, there was a slight pallor creeping into her face.

"Haven't you made a mistake, miss?"

"No. I know you."

"You know me?" in simulated surprise.

"You are the same gentleman whom I met on the guard of the boat last night. You accompanied me to this house a short while ago, in the disguise of a woman—I discovered that when you sat down in the entry, for you revealed a pair of gaiters, the marking on the top of which I recognized as the same I had seen in the scant light from the swinging lamp by the door to the guard-deck. I know you now, because that small beard you wear I detect to be false, and imagining that away, I can see the same face I saw on the guard-deck. I ask you why you are following me? Who are you, and what do you want?"

She spoke with a perfect composure, though firmly, as if she was fully determined to exact an explanation from him.

And Mark Magic had to admit to himself that this beautiful and mysterious girl was a thoroughly keen personage, to have discovered him in the manner that she had.

"Then you are Julia Diering?" he said, queringly, not losing sight of the fact that if it was she he had at last seen her face and perhaps learned her name.

"I am she. And now tell me: what do you want with me?"

"Really, to that, I must say, I do not want anything with you, except, perhaps, to protect you from a pair of rogues."

"I received your note on the boat, and sent you a reply. I am very much obliged to you for your interest, and I will hope that it is entirely disinterested. But I prefer to be left alone severely alone. As I told you then, I am a much-wronged woman, and I desire that no one shall seek to interfere in my affairs. If the worst comes to worst, I can do as I intended to do when you intercepted me on the boat."

"Drown yourself?"

"Yes."

"And what of your child?—will it be benefited if you take such a mad leap out of the world?"

It was a random remark, but he instantly saw that he had struck home, for the paleness of her face increased.

"You have no right to know anything about my affairs," she said.

"You are right, miss—"

"Besides, I do not feel uneasy now. I think I have eluded the one who is and has been so persistently dogging me. I may have some rest here, in this comparatively obscure position, where seldom any one but ladies would come, and perhaps at some time in the future rejoin—"

"Your child, would you say?"

A slight flame now crept into her beautiful face.

"You must excuse me, sir, from further conversation," and she turned as if about to leave the counter.

"Stay a moment, please."

"What is it?"

"I have two very important things to say to you."

"What are they?"

"Are you aware that when people express a determined intention of making away with themselves, they can be arrested and confined for their own good's sake?"

A smile of derision, so slight that it would have been imperceptible to any but the detective's keen eye, crept to her lips.

"I do not apprehend that I will be arrested."

"You may be."

"There are no witnesses to the attempt I made upon my life but yourself—"

"The man Harper also saw it."

"Ah!"

"I can arrest him as a witness and prefer the charge myself. Look at this and tell me whether you doubt my ability to make out sufficient cause against you to have you confined as a person bent upon suicide?"

He slyly exhibited his badge.

He had determined to "come out" to a certain extent with the mysterious girl, in the hope that he could catch something from her either by startlement or through securing her confidence.

"You are a detective," she half gasped, while the pallor came back to her face and the large, glorious eyes stared at the badge.

"Precisely."

With a sudden vehemence, though in a tone that was scarcely above a whisper, she demanded, stepping again in front of him:

"If you are a detective, tell me why you are pursuing me? I have done no wrong—it is I who am wronged!"

"I am pursuing you for your own good, as you must admit when I tell you the second item for which I detained you."

"What is it?"

"You are not by any means as safe as you imagine."

"Explain," she uttered, with a quick breath.

"The two men—for there are two of them after you—followed you from the wharf to this house. Your enemy, whose name is Harper, knows exactly where you are at this minute."

"Yes, yes, Berry Harper is my mortal enemy, if ever woman had one in this world," she said, in an accent of emotion and inward pain.

Then she asked:

"You cannot surely be engaged by them to hunt me down?"

"Not by a long shot!" burst from the detective, in an involuntarily characteristic way.

And he added, while the hazel orbs seemed to be searching for something in his inmost soul:

"Miss, I am so far your friend. I know enough to know that these men from whom you are fleeing are rogues of first water. Now, if I was made your confidant, I could perhaps suggest some way for getting rid of their persecution without your entertaining thoughts of suicide to escape them—a thought which, if you persist in it, I assure you frankly, will cause me to have you arrested and confined for your own safety."

Behind the counter she wrung her hands together.

"Alas, I know of no way to get rid of them except by constant flight; and I am afraid to go too far, lest I shall be waylaid by Berry Harper, and upon my persisting in refusing to tell him what he wants me to tell, he might not hesitate, in his rage, at killing me. He is a terrible man—"

"Will you let me be the judge as to the possibility of a way by giving me your confidence?"

For perhaps just one second, she seemed to hesitate, with lips partly open yet held silent.

Then in an outburst of resolution, she said:

"I will do it. You shall know all. I must protect my child!"

But she hastened to say, with another breath:

"Not now, not now. I will see you again. I have talked too long here; my employer needs me in the rear room for further instruction."

"Whatever you do, do it early then," said Magic, elated at having brought matters to so satisfactory a pass, "else these rascals may do you an irreparable injury before I can decide upon a method to protect or rid you of them."

"I will see you to-night," she said.

"At what hour?"

"Nine o'clock."

"Where?"

"Ah, I cannot appoint a place—for it must be away from the house—as I am an entire stranger in this great city."

"Then I will make a suggestion. When you go out, walk toward Lombard street, thence westward to Eighth. Take a car north, and tell the conductor to let you out at Walnut

street. Walk east from that corner till you come to Washington square. I will be there watching for you, and we can walk together while you explain to me and allow me to become your friend. Can you remember the instructions?"

"Yes. I will come. I have resolved to tell you all."

"And you have resolved wisely. Good-day." Mark Magic went out from the shop.

And almost simultaneously the proprietress came into the forward part of her establishment, saying:

"I hope you suited the gentleman in his purchase—Why, what is this?" picking up the small parcel which was lying on the counter.

"Ah, the gentleman has forgotten his purchase, after much trouble in making his selection," was the ready response.

"Well, he'll miss it, I guess, and come back."

In the course of the day the new employee gained the highest approval of Mrs. Duffy, by her knowledge of the ribbon department and aptness for catching fresh information regarding her future duties in the store.

"Have you no friends?" asked the elderly lady, kindly, at a moment when they were together with no business engaging Julia.

"Yes, madam, I have two."

"Only two in the wide world?"

"They are all."

"Relatives?"

"No, one is an old nurse who has been attached to me since I was a babe. The other—"

There was a hesitancy and accompanying it a slight blush.

Mrs. Duffy, a widow herself, caught the significance of both.

"Your lover, I presume?"

"The gentleman to whom I am betrothed, madam."

"I hope he is a good gentleman, for you look to be a very good girl; and there are so many good girls throwing themselves away nowadays that it is positively a shame to the community."

"I believe him to be worthy, madam. He will probably visit me soon, and as I am to be an inmate of your house, I hope you will not have any objections to his visiting here?"

"None at all," replied genial Mrs. Duffy, who rather liked the idea of a courtship proceeding in her long-since quieted and lonely home.

At about the hour of dusk, when it was understood that Julia's duties were to cease, she said to Mrs. Duffy:

"I would like to go out for a short time to make some little purchases for my toilet. I do not think I shall be gone long."

"Very well, my dear. Be careful you do not lose yourself, for you know you said you were a stranger here."

"I shall be careful to note my way."

Once more in her deeply somber suit and thickly veiled, Julia Diering went forth upon the street, repeating to herself as she hurried along the directions given her by the detective.

Within five minutes after her departure a young man rung the door-bell and inquired whether Miss Diering resided there.

"My name is Harold Hammond," he announced to Mrs. Duffy. "Miss Diering is expecting me from Washington."

CHAPTER VII.

A WOMAN'S STRANGE STORY.

JULIA DIERING remembered the detective's instructions admirably, and by following them, soon arrived at the corner of Eighth and Walnut streets.

Having ascertained which was the eastern direction from the conductor, she alighted and hurried forward to meet the man with whom she had made the strange appointment.

By the time she reached the square, night had fully settled down, and the locality, with the expanse of trees on the one side and the heavens above only dimly glimmering in the light of a half cloud-hidden moon, had about it an air of desertion at the northwestern entrance to the local resort.

As if people apprehended a coming storm, there were but few forms visible within the square, and scarcely a pedestrian in sight on the Walnut street side.

At the curb she paused, casting searching glances off along the spectral vista of trees bounding the western rail, till their ancient shapes seemed to melt into a Stygian and ghostly blackness afar.

And she was on excellent time, for just as she reached the pavement before the massive gate, the State House bell began its sonorous strokes for the hour of nine, filling the leafy domes of Independence and Washington squares with the quivering tremolo of its notes.

A figure approached her, coming apparently from behind a tree.

"You are punctual to the minute, Miss Diering."

"You are the party I am to see?" she asked,

bending for a glimpse of his face as if uncertain of his identity.

"Mark Magic, at your service," he introduced.

Magic was still attired in his disguise as a little old gentleman, a character he so frequently used.

"What I have to tell you must be said quickly," Julia said, with a slight nervousness. "I had to tell a falsehood to Mrs. Duffy to keep my engagement with you, and she may even now suspect wrong of me when I do return without any purchases—"

"Let us be moving on," interrupted Magic; and almost in the same breath he exclaimed, lowly: "A—h!"

"What is it?" Julia asked, arrested by the exclamation.

"Oh, nothing, only I have a fancy that you have been followed, that's all."

"Followed! Why, who—?"

She checked the inquiry that was upon her lips, with a little gasp, for she well knew that if she was followed it could only be, probably, by her enemy, the man called Harper.

"Do not be alarmed," assured Magic. "It may have been no more than a fancy of mine. I shall keep a good lookout, however."

He had led the way leisurely inside the gate to the graveled walk, and they were proceeding at an angle toward the Sixth street side, amid the cool loneliness of the square, Julia having taken his arm.

"Now, Miss Diering, if you will proceed with your story and make me your confidant, I am sure you will have cause to be glad of it at some future time. I shall prefer that you tell me in your own way, so shall not begin by asking questions."

Julia, as if she attached more importance to his recent fancy concerning some one dogging their steps, was casting furtive glances about her, as if she expected momentarily to be confronted by the man or men she dreaded.

She observed that her companion avoided the darker portions of the square as they moved along, and she asked:

"Why do you keep so close to the lights? If we are followed, perhaps, if we sought more darkened or shaded spots, we might evade those who are, you think, coming behind us."

"I am not so sure that we are followed, Miss Diering; but if we are, then I have a special object in keeping near the lights."

"What object?"

"I want the trackers—supposing that there are any—to have the fullest opportunity to keep near us. I don't wish them to lose us."

"You are inviting danger upon both yourself and me."

"Oh, no. I have no fear of that. I think I can take pretty good care of myself and you too."

The detective had no mere fancy, as he asserted; he knew positively, ere they had gone twenty paces, that two stealthy forms were in their rear, actually dogging himself and Julia.

Instantly he had resolved upon a course of procedure regarding them, and lest his little divertisement might occur prematurely for the story he anticipated hearing from his companion, he urged:

"Think no more of the supposition that we are followed, Miss Diering, but proceed with what you have decided to confide to me."

"I have told you that I am a wronged woman," she said, at once. "I shall tell you why. I am now over twenty years of age. At the age of eighteen I was married. I loved then two men; the one I married was, as unfortunately turned out afterward, a man whom no good woman could love after knowing his traits thoroughly. These traits I learned all too soon. Indeed, I wish they could have been hidden from me forever. My father was a wealthy captain sailing between Baltimore and Brazil, and it was he who decided—as he thought best at the time—upon the one I should select of my two suitors to marry."

"A year after my marriage Heaven blessed me with a little boy baby. My husband, at the time of the child's birth, was in New Orleans, indulging—as I knew was his constant habit—in the heaviest kind of gambling. He had often ill-treated and deserted me for months at a time, and my father returning from a voyage a few days after the birth of my boy and finding me in an almost friendless condition—for I had no other relatives living than my father—grew so furious that he demanded of me to apply for an immediate divorce. My husband had exhausted all the funds left for my maintenance by my father during my father's absence; I was literally penniless. I was angry myself then, and readily consented to the proceeding. The divorce was obtained; I was free as far as the law could make me so."

"But, alas, I was not to so easily get rid of the man whom I had now come to despise. I never saw him until after my father's death. When my father died he left me a strange legacy. He had, while abroad, invested all his cash wealth—and it was considerable—in diamonds. On his death-bed he placed in my hands a velvet belt with little pockets, in which were carefully stowed numerous diamonds, beauti-

fully cut and ready for the mounting. These, he said, I was to keep for my child, to be given him when he arrived at manhood, and I was not to use them as long as I could possibly support myself otherwise. He left me a little ready money, and I expected to make my way in the world in some way while preserving the heritage intact for my child."

"It was then that my husband—or the man who had been my husband—presented himself, in a tower of passion almost murderous over the fact of my having procured the divorce. I confess, I stood in fear of him. I gave him, under terrible threats what little ready money I had, and for a time was relieved of his hateful presence. But in some manner that will always remain a mystery to me, he learned of the wonderfully rich legacy my father had left the infant and came to me again, demanding a share in it. This I refused flatly to grant. I was then living in Washington. Several times he came with the same demand, each time growing more violent; finally he threatened that if I did not accede to his wishes, he would make away with the child and so conceal or kill it that I might give up all hope of ever seeing it again. You may ask why I did not have him taken in hand by the authorities at once? Ah, you do not know the man. He has confederates ready at this minute—who they are I have not the slightest idea—who will, immediately upon my taking such a course, deliberately murder my child! Such was the man whom I had chosen for a husband," she added, with a sigh of bitterness.

"Proceed, please," urged Magic, who had glanced slyly over his shoulder and ascertained that the skulking figures had drawn somewhat closer.

"With me at this time was a faithful nurse, who had been employed to nurse me in my own babyhood, and who was very much attached to my child. Filled with terror at the threats of the man, I resolved upon flight. One night at midnight, I sent the nurse, with my child, to Chicago, with instructions that she must never communicate with me excepting when I should write telling her where she might safely direct her letters and for what length of time, to inform me regarding the health of little Willie. The wretch whom I so greatly feared did not learn of this departure; and a night later I also fled from the city, going south to Richmond. But he found me. He also learned there that I was not accompanied by my child and that my child was no longer at my former residence in Washington. He renewed his awful threats—now directed against me personally if I did not reveal to him the whereabouts of the child. I fled again, and have been fleeing—with him in pursuit—being always careful, as far as I could, to keep where I could summon instant help in case he attempted personal injury to me. I know that his plan now is to abduct me if he can, and by some torture wring from my lips the knowledge of the whereabouts of Willie; then he will secure the child, and he knows that sooner than see harm come to my offspring, I would reveal anything he might desire."

"I think I have placed the child safely away from him; my object now is to keep myself out of his villainous clutches. As long as I can do that, I can baffle him. At times—one occasion of which you were witness to—I have become so desperate that I thought to end the matter by committing suicide. You now know all. It would be useless to have him arrested; that would only increase my danger, for I tell you he has confederates who are sworn to kill me if he is taken into custody. So if you had intended anything like that toward aiding me in my wretchedness, I beg of you to abandon the thought. Since I have seen and conversed with you I have decided that I would be wronging my child too deeply by sacrificing my own life. I will live, if I can, to avoid this man, if possible, and maybe some day Heaven itself will find a means for befriending me."

She paused.

Magic was silent for some moments.

He had been started out on a blind trail to "make" a case.

He was then thinking that he had found a strange case and one which, at first glance, did not seem to offer him any solution as to how it could be arranged so as to benefit this beautiful and suffering woman.

"What was your husband's name?" he questioned.

"Berry Harper."

"I might have surmised that."

"You can see that it would do no good to have him arrested."

"Perhaps not," admitted the detective, who was busy with his thoughts upon the strange story.

Then he said:

"I think you are safe for a time at least with the lady on Sixth street where you are employed. I will think this matter over, and it may be that I can strike upon some plan to help you out of your remarkable dilemma."

"One thing I must tell you."

"What is that?"

"I have no money to pay you for your services, and I know that detectives expect to b

rewarded for time and labor. I am, as you have seen, struggling for my own maintenance and a margin to send to the nurse and Willie. I have nothing."

"I shall not ask for money," declared Magic. "I have really very little business on hand in Baltimore, and at least until summoned by my chief, I can devote myself to you, and it will tend to keep my hand in. A detective may grow rusty from idleness; and so, I take hold of your case freely."

"I thank you from the bottom of my heart!" the girl exclaimed.

Hardly had the words left her lips, when the wary detective cried with sharp quickness:

"Look out!"

He dropped her arm; she turned just in time to see her companion engaged in a scuffle with two assailing figures.

Only for an instant did the struggle last.

Magic's right arm, in the hand of which was a black-jack, performed several sweeping circles, and the next instant two motionless forms lay on the gravel walk almost at her feet.

"Come," he said, hurriedly, and taking her arm in his own again. "Let me place you in a car. Do not again go out from your home, by day or by night, until you hear from me or under instructions from me."

They hastened from the square, leaving the two men lying there just outside the pale flicker of the gas lamp by the grassy plot.

Magic placed her in a south-bound car and watched alternately the car and the gravel walk behind him, to see whether his recent assailants had recovered and were following her.

Then walking back over the brief battleground, he discovered that the roguish pair had recovered and fled in another direction.

CHAPTER VIII.

A MYSTERY OF DIAMONDS.

BEFORE returning to the house of Mrs. Duffy, Julia went to a letter-box at the corner—only a few steps from the doorway—and dropped a letter.

She had been given a key, and with this she admitted herself without disturbing Mrs. Duffy, proceeding to her allotted room on the first floor at the back of the building.

During her absence something singular had transpired at the house.

Mrs. Duffy was sitting in the up-stairs sitting-room, when her housemaid came to the door, her face wearing a peculiar and slightly startled expression.

"What is it, Mary?" inquired the lady, perceiving that the girl had something to say.

"Oh, ma'am, ain't you afraid of burglars?"

"Burglars, Mary!" in surprise, and glancing up quickly, as if the question and the appearance of the girl's face had excited a thought of the immediate proximity of burglars.

"Yes, ma'am. Ain't you afraid of burglars with so much wealth hidden in the house?"

"I don't know what you are talking about, Mary. I haven't any wealth hidden in my house."

"But I means the diamond's, ma'am."

"Diamonds! Mary, are you going out of your senses! I haven't any diamonds—never have worn any for this many a year. What in the world are you talking about, I say?"

"Why, ma'am, the diamond's brought here by the new lady clerk that's goin' to board with you."

"Diamonds!—brought here by my new clerk, Mary!" and Mrs. Duffy stared at the girl with wide eyes.

Then she arose and approached the girl, demanding:

"I wish you to tell me what all this means at once?"

"Why, ma'am, don't you know it? I thought you must know it. She's a awfu' rich lady, she is, I tell you, an' I thought of course you knew about the diamond's. She carries 'em about so careless like. I thought at first they couldn't be real diamond's. But I'm sure now they are, because they'll cut glass; I tried one of 'em."

Mrs. Duffy was a thoroughly astounded woman.

She gazed hard into the face of her domestic, as if to see whether she was not insane.

Then she said, with forced calmness:

"Mary, tell me exactly what you mean by this strange talk. No, I do not know about my new clerk having any diamonds. I believed her to be a very poor and lovely girl in search of work, which I gave her, when she answered my advertisement in a Baltimore paper. Tell me, Mary, if you have discovered anything."

"Well, ma'am, since you don't know it, you ought to. She's got a little sachel, you know?"

"Yes," impatiently.

"She put this sachel under between the mattresses of her bed, and as I was fixing up the bed, it being her first night here, I found the sachel. Some way 'r 'nother the clasps was open, an' I saw a pretty little belt like in it; it was made so unusual that I took it out and examined it—"

"A very wrong and pryful proceeding, Mary," reproved Mrs. Duffy.

"Yes, ma'am, I know that, but I really could-

n't help it, an' you know I didn't mean no harm, 'cause you've had me now these two years an' I've done my best to prove that I'm a good girl—"

"Yes, Mary, I have no fault to find with you in the past. Go on with what you have to say, please."

"Well, ma'am, I took out the belt, and it was so heavy with something that was in a lot of tiny little pockets, that for the life of me I couldn't help looking to see what was in the pockets—though I say I didn't mean no harm, ma'am—"

"Go on, Mary."

"The pockets was full of little bright, shining, transparent stones. At first I thought they was diamond's, then I thought they couldn't be—so many of 'em—and then I tried one on the window-pane, an' it cut just like the diamond's in the drug-store. Yes, ma'am: there's lots of 'em—all diamond's that belongs to this new lady that's come into the house."

Mrs. Duffy was very grave.

She felt that if the girl's tale was true, she must have been deceived by her new clerk.

No young girl so poor as to seek employment in a millinery store could be honestly possessed of a wealth of diamonds.

So argued Mrs. Duffy in her own mind.

"I wish you to show me the sachel," she said, after a moment's reflection and upon a sudden decision.

The domestic led the way to the bedchamber that was to be occupied by Julia Diering.

Everything had been nicely arranged by Mary for the advent of the new clerk, and the sachel had been carefully replaced exactly as found by the honest girl.

Raising the upper mattress, Mary now drew forth the mysterious sachel, handing it to her employer, saying:

"There it is, ma'am; look for yourself."

Mrs. Duffy slowly opened the receptacle and took out a small leather belt that was contained therein.

She extracted one of the glistening stones from its pocket and examined it critically beneath the gas-jet.

There could be no doubt about the genuineness of the stone; she was familiar with both the pure and the imitation; she saw that her supposed poor clerk was strangely possessed of a small fortune in the precious gems thus carried about in careless openness, and began to count—one, two, three—

Pausing before she had counted all, returning them to their pockets and closing the sachel, handing it to Mary.

"Replace it exactly as you found it," she said quietly. "I will have a talk with Miss Diering about this mystery. I have a right to some explanation, I think."

"That you have, ma'am, when people go about with diamond's an' makes believe they're poor as a turkey."

It was within a few seconds after this mystifying occurrence that the door-bell rung, and Mrs. Duffy, having sent Mary around the corner for some groceries, descended herself to answer the summons.

On the steps stood a young and handsome gentleman.

"Does Miss Diering reside here?" he inquired.

"She does."

"Can I see her, if you please?"

"She has just gone out, sir."

"Gone out! What a pity! My name is Harold Hammond. Miss Diering is expecting me from Washington."

"I do not think she has gone far. Will you step inside, and perhaps she will return presently."

"Thank you."

Mrs. Duffy ushered the visitor into her cosy little parlor and turned on the gas, saying:

"Please be seated. I understood Miss Diering to say that she was expecting some one to call—perhaps you are the gentleman?"

"It is quite likely, madam. I will wait a short while for her, as I desire to see her very much."

The young man settled himself with a book which he took from the center-table, as if he had determined to wait for the coming of Julia, no matter how long that wait might be.

When Julia did return, so lightly did she enter, that he did not hear the opening or closing of the front door; neither did Mrs. Duffy. But it happened that Mrs. Duffy just about that moment thought it was time for her new clerk to be putting in an appearance, and had descended the rear stairs, advancing to the bedchamber on the first floor.

To her surprise she saw a brilliant light burning there.

More, the door was slightly ajar, and, though she did not intend anything like playing the spy, she was arrested by seeing the beautiful girl on her knees, with hands clasped and lovely arms extended upward, as if in an imploring attitude to Heaven, while she murmured:

"I cannot help it! I must flee, flee ever, and lie, and live on my haunted, miserable life to its end for the sake of my child! Oh, God, pity me and find some way for me out of this labyrinth!"

Now more than ever was a mystery forming around Mrs. Duffy's new and beautiful clerk.

And Mrs. Duffy, despite her kindly heart, had no liking for mysteries, being a plain, open-hearted woman herself.

Probably she would have had an interview with Julia at that moment, had it not been for the fact that a waiting visitor was in the parlor.

She tapped lightly on the door.

In a startled way Julia gained her feet and responded:

"Who is it? Come in."

"Only me, my dear," said Mrs. Duffy, calmly, as she entered.

"I was a little startled, madam. I almost lost myself to-night, notwithstanding your fair warning, and I believe I am quite nervous in consequence."

"You entered so very quietly, my dear, that it was only by accident I knew you were here. There is a gentleman in the parlor who has been waiting to see you for some time. The hour is rather late, now," she said, as if to hint that a gentleman visitor should not be detained long at that hour.

"To see me? Ah, it must be Mr. Hammond—no one else could call, for to him alone I sent my expected address here."

"Yes, he said that was his name," replied Mrs. Duffy, departing as Julia came forth on her way to the parlor.

Then good Mrs. Duffy did something she had never done before in all her life of many years.

When she saw Julia enter the parlor and pull the door partly to, she turned and tip-toed forward to a position whence she could overhear in a measure what transpired within the room.

As she had expected, there was an immediate lovers' greeting exchanged between the two.

The conversation at once turned into simple, lover-like affairs, and as the listener did not enjoy such talk to any great extent, she withdrew.

An hour later—being the hour when she usually retired—Mrs. Duffy descended to see whether the visitor had taken his departure.

The gas jet, lowered, still burned in the parlor, but neither Julia nor the young man were there.

"He has gone," she thought, putting out the gas.

To satisfy herself further, however, she tapped lightly on the door of Julia's room.

There was no response.

"Gone to bed, I guess," she muttered to herself. "I guess she must have been pretty well tired out, after traveling all last night and then working in the shop all day. In the morning, though, before she resumes her work, I'll have a conversation with her, and she must give me some satisfactory account of how she became possessed of so many precious diamonds—she a poor girl. I greatly fear that her beauty is dangerous to herself. But I shall not judge her until I know; and if my suspicions are correctly founded, why, of course she must leave my establishment at once."

With which thoughts she sought her own bedroom, and was soon sleeping the sleep of a conscience at peace and rest with the world in deeds and comforts.

By rule, the millinery shop opened early each morning; there was no tardiness permissible in any of the employees, except in actual cases of sickness.

But eight o'clock had come and passed; the girls were busy as bees in the rear working-room, and Mrs. Duffy had been considerably engaged herself in the store up to that hour.

Julia Diering had not yet made her appearance.

"Poor thing! She is probably so tired out that, in her sound sleep, she did not hear the breakfast-bell," was the employer's liberal thought.

And she made no movement in the matter until, after a glance at the great clock on the wall which showed her that it was almost nine o'clock, she suddenly resolved that she would be permitting a bad example for the other girls if she allowed Miss Diering to slumber longer.

Going to the door of Julia's room, she tapped peremptorily.

No answer.

She tapped again, and louder.

No response.

Then, to her astonishment, she discovered that the door was not fastened.

Pushing gently, she stepped across the threshold.

Only one step.

There she paused, and with drooping jaw she stood, suddenly grown white as a sheet, the expression of her face one of absolutely ghastly horror.

For just one moment her voice, her strength, her every faculty of volition seemed to desert her.

Then all in the building were startled and brought standing to their feet by the sound of a loud, long, terrified shriek, that pierced their ears with the cutting sharpness of a surgeon's scalpel and caused their very hearts to flutter into stillness.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PREY WAS NOT THERE.

HARPER and Forceps remained in the small room allotted to them until pretty late in the afternoon—a substantial dinner being brought up to them by Sandy after they had aroused from a sleep of which both were really in need after the wakeful experiences on the boat during the previous night.

Both were in excellent spirits as they manipulated the repast, and eat heartily of all that was set before them.

"I told you we'd find Sandy a square pal in a corner," remarked Forceps, while washing down his mouthful with a draught of foamy beer.

"I hope nothing will happen to break us up, now that we are so well started," said Harper, suddenly with a grave face, as if he scented something like a failure ahead, notwithstanding the nicety with which all seemed to have been arranged.

"Bah! what are you going across a bridge to hunt trouble for?"

"Oh, I am not doing that."

"Let up on the bad-weather prognostications, then."

Like all—or nearly all—men of his class, Harper was given somewhat to superstition. As they were engaged with their meal, a premonition of pending failure came over him.

Nothing of the kind disturbed Forceps. He ate heartily, and afterward seemed in better spirits than ever.

The villain almost began to feel in his grasp the diamonds that the beautiful girl was known to have secreted somewhere at another point than her own proximity. He had not the slightest doubt of the entire plot as made out between them and Sandy.

While they were talking of plans for their future after having wrested from their intended victim the wealth of which they were in such persistent pursuit, Sandy entered the room.

"Say, hadn't you fellers better come down an' make yerselves popular? There's a lot of the boys down there—the best an' pick of 'em. They'd be glad to know you if you kem with a' interdoce from me, they would."

Harper and Forceps, with a simultaneous thought, cast a look down at their notably genteel garments. And Forceps said:

"Now look here, Sandy, the fact is just about as I told you. We're pretty well down at the heel; we couldn't toss the liquor much for the new friends you've got down there. And besides, this ain't the thing, you know," pointing to the attire of himself and his companion. "They'd take us for a pair of too durned genteel boys to be among them. Now suppose we shape things up on the square. You've got some loose change, I know. You give us some plainer garments and a little difference in cash; then we'll go down an' see the boys. That's fair, ain't it? We'll all be flush soon enough, and we don't mind sacrificing our duds when we're to meet a distinguished crowd, you know."

"Oh, I ain't no objections," returned Sandy, observing that the clothes offered were excellent articles. "How much do you fellers want?"

"Pass us a twenty or so."

From an inner pocket, he drew forth the required amount and cheerfully handed it over.

After furnishing them with suits of inferior clothes, Sandy led the way to the bar-room.

As he had told them, a crowd was there. Perhaps a dozen of as hard-looking cases as could be found in the Quaker City were congregated variously at the tables and the counter, where some were guzzling their beer in a thirsty manner.

In a quiet way, Sandy introduced his new friends and guests, though giving them fictitious names, according to a request made by Forceps as they descended the stairs.

"This here's Hotel Harry," he said, indicating a youthful and rather handsome man—though attired in a rather ragged manner. "An' this here's Boardin'-house Sal," as a woman with a vitiated countenance pressed her way forward, when she found that new-comers were to be introduced.

All were soon on terms of intimacy with the new arrivals, and these two soon had a history of each "crook," volunteered by himself.

Hotel Harry had once been one of the most successful operators of hotels, with skeleton keys, that had ever been hunted by the detective police.

Boarding-house Sal had plied her vocation among fashionable boarding-houses at a time when she was not so marked by debauchery and her vice-tainted companionships; about every "fence" that could have been spotted between Kensington and Southwark knew her well and had taken such things as jewelry and fine dress goods from her, which she had purloined from the wardrobe of the guests at the houses into which she insinuated herself.

And so on to the end of the chapter, until the acquaintance was ripened between the crooks of the gang and the new-comers by an interchange of such confidences.

All seemed proud of their record, and Forceps recounted of himself such accomplishments that adequately popularized him.

Harper could furnish no history save that of being a professional gambler; but he was received cordially nevertheless, upon Forceps's assurance that he intended to do a job ere long that would throw many a job in the past completely into the shade.

Beer and whisky flowed copiously.

Sandy found an opportunity to whisper into Forceps's ear:

"Look out, you two. Remember what you've got on hand fer to-night, an' don't be too free with the stuff, or you'll both have too big a head on you fer to do it right, mind."

"Oh, that's all right. I'm looking out for all that," Forceps replied, with a knowing nod that indicated the spittoon at his feet.

It was a monstrous large spittoon, and Sandy saw that much of the beer Forceps and his companion had been supposed to drink had been slyly deposited there until the thing was almost brimming full.

The hours of the afternoon slipped by with this sort of coarse conviviality, when suddenly Harper leaned forward across the table at which they were sitting and said, in a low voice:

"What if the girl should scoot out again while we're wasting our time over this gang?"

"I never thought of it," replied Forceps, gravely. "But it's a good hint, Berry. Come, we'll get out of this and do a little spying around."

They invented an excuse to leave the place and turned in the direction of Mrs. Duffy's millinery store.

With the arrival of that hour in the evening the store had been promptly closed, as was customary with the proprietress.

As they came near, their presence partly screened from the observation of any one who might have been standing on the steps to the side door, because of the dense shadows there, they saw a female in black garments issue from the entrance and move rapidly off along the street.

"Just what I expected," observed Harper, in an accent somewhat very much like a hiss.

"By thunder!" burst from Forceps, in a low breath. "It looks as if you were about right. But I wonder if she really is going to light out?"

"That is for us to see. Come."

Stealthily they followed her.

The girl, Julia Diering, had not the remotest idea that she was being shadowed by her enemies, though she even cast behind her a searching glance before reaching the car which she had been directed to take by Magic.

The two knew their business well in this regard.

And at the moment when the girl was being taken in the car to the place of appointment with the detective, these two villains had succeeded in gaining the front platform of the car. They were not far behind when the meeting occurred at the square, and Harper uttered something like an oath, as he said:

"That man she is with is the same man we have been having the trouble with ever since we left Baltimore."

"Don't look like him—"

"His hight gives him away to me, though he is wearing another disguise now. Curse him! Forceps, we must get him out of the way, or he'll spoil our game yet. I told you I was feeling dubious about the success of our plan; now I feel it all the more. The man is a detective, and he is her friend, that's plain to be seen—Look out there! Get behind this tree, quick!"

As the detective and the girl moved away toward the square, the latter glanced behind her, but not in time to detect the trailing figures, so prompt had been Harper's warning.

"Yes, we must get him out of the way," agreed Forceps. "But how? He's no fool—"

"This Washington Square is a pretty lonely place," said Harper, suggestively, as they remained for a moment longer behind one of the great trees that stretched in an aisle along the curb to the far side of the square.

"I tumble," rejoined Forceps.

"We might lay him out and nobody know anything more about it when he is found in the morning, than that a man was found dead on the walk."

"But the girl would know us."

"Tie your handkerchief around your face below the eyes."

Both did this; and as both had dark silk handkerchiefs, the fact that their faces were shrouded at all would only have been noticed at extremely close quarters.

"Come," said Harper, leading off toward another path, while he kept his hawkish eyes on the leisurely-walking couple.

It was as they skulked forward, coming closer to the two at a slight angle of the path, that Magic's alert eyes discovered their suspicious presence.

He immediately began the tactics as shown, which the rogues did not detect to be a plain endeavor to bring them to the point of an encounter.

The evil pair had now verged so close to their intended prey that to have continued their stealthy manner of procedure would have been to reveal that they meant mischief.

At a signal from Harper, both stepped boldly and carelessly out upon the main path close to where Magic and Julia Diering were passing at the moment.

Two ruffian hands strongly gripped two murderous weapons of silence, the deadly black-jacks.

A few steps, and then another signal from Harper, who had taken upon himself a leadership in their assassin programme.

Simultaneously they sprung toward the pair. The black-jacks were upraised to strike down the seemingly unconscious detective.

But Magic was fully prepared, as shown, for their reception.

As they came upon him, he wheeled and struck out with his right hand, in which he had a black-jack, while with his other hand he caught the upraised arm of Harper as in a vise.

The stroke he had delivered had sent Forceps reeling headlong to the gravel walk; in the next instant, and before the astonished Harper could realize fully how completely the detective had turned the tables, becoming himself the attacking party, the second villain received a blow on the head which fairly seemed to crack his skull.

At least, a thousand stars burst across his vision; his head was filled with a ringing as if of a myriad bells in discord, and he too went after his companion to the gravel earth.

When Harper, who was first to recover, scrambled dazedly to his feet, he glanced about as if expecting to have a renewal of the difficulty with the spry and alert detective.

Magic and the girl had disappeared beyond the gate toward the cars.

He stooped and shook Forceps, crying:

"Here, get up! Are you hit hard? Blast me if I didn't think for just about a second that my head was split open! The man's a small devil with his arms and fists!"

Forceps groaned a little, as he slowly returned to consciousness, and his first words were:

"Where is the infernal cuss, Berry?"

"Gone!"

The reply seemed rather to relieve his mind.

"I'm glad enough of it," he said, rubbing his head with a grimace of pain. "Did you get some of that business?"

"I have just told you that I thought I was laid out for good and all. He laid it onto me after he downed you."

"What sort of man can he be?"

"Half lightning and eyes in the back of his head, I take it."

They hurried from the square by the Seventh street gate.

As they went, keeping within the sheltering gloom of the aisle of trees, Forceps said:

"The girl's all right, anyhow, I think."

"How do you mean?"

"She wasn't intending to try and give us another slip."

"What makes you think that?"

"Why, she just came out to hold an interview with this detective friend of hers—"

"A thousand curses on the detective!" interpolated Harper.

"And now that they've had their talk, she's gone back to the house, to bed, no doubt."

"We'll soon know whether your idea is right or not. Come on, let's get to Sandy's."

When they arrived again at the low den of their saloon-keeper friend, they found the place very different from what it had been during the greater part of the day.

The bar-room was literally crowded with a mixed mass of whites and blacks, who drank and swore and gabbled until the smoky and sickening air was filled with sounds and smells that caused even our duo of rascals to wish themselves soon out of it.

Forceps beckoned Sandy aside at a moment when there was a brief lull in the business at the counter.

"Got everthing ready?" he asked.

"You bet I have. The things is in the up-stairs room. And say, you'd better not make too free with these fellers now; nearly every man of 'em is on a big spree, an' if you didn't join in the drinkin'—which you musn't do—they'd mebbe kick up a row. I'm a goin' to close the place at twelve, whether they like it or not. Then I'll be up an' join you an' start you off!"

They followed the advice of Sandy and sought the small room.

Here, by the light of a sputtering candle and a pack of dirty cards and a bottle of whisky which they were warned not to use too freely, they wasted away the time until the hour should arrive when they would make their grand effort for the abduction of the girl, Julia Diering.

Promptly, as he had asserted he would, Sandy shut up the bar-room, ejecting those who were inclined to make an obstreperous resistance to the unusual proceeding. For the place had not been closed before two or three o'clock in the morning since the first day Sandy had started business there.

He sought his friends in the upper room.

"Are you two perfectly straight, now?" he interrogated, looking searchingly from one to the other.

He was an old hand at wickedness; he well knew that such an undertaking as the one in which these two were about to engage required the clearest of clear heads.

"Oh, we're all right, depend," answered Forceps. "And now, old man, where are the things for the racket?"

"Here they are," and he led the way to a cupboard at one side.

Forceps, who took the lead in this proceeding throughout, appropriated the articles which Sandy had procured.

A few minutes later and the saloon-keeper, in a stealthy way and in a blackness of night that was almost impenetrable, let his pals out at the rear gate.

As Forceps had rightly conjectured, the alleyway at the side of Sandy's establishment led directly to the rear gate to the dwelling occupied as a millinery store by Mrs. Duffy.

Harper and Forceps, with a whispered warning to their assistant to remain there on the lookout for them, moved noiselessly off in the darkness.

Forceps had no difficulty in locating the right gate.

To their surprise, they found this unbolted.

And a greater surprise awaited them when they made their way forward to the window opening on the side yard.

This also was unfastened.

"Mighty accommodating and careless people," remarked Forceps, lowly, as he lighted a bull's eye and for an instant flashed it around them. "Be careful, Berry, there's a patch of earth under the window. Don't tread in it, for it will leave a footprint."

With the lantern closed, and using one hand, Forceps gave his partner a push that lifted him to the sill.

Harper then assisted the other to ascend.

As he entered, Forceps drew shut the blinds, so that their outlines could not be detected against any background of possible light that might occur from one of the buildings at the foot of the lot.

"Turn on the slide," came in a subdued tone.

A brilliant and momentary ray flashed around the room which they had thus so easily entered.

Brief, but the brilliance was enough to reveal to them a strange sight.

There in the darkness which followed the reclosing of the slide, each stood as if electrified into a statue, and in their faces was a scared look that only the impenetrable blackness of their surrounding concealed.

"Berry?"

"Ay. Did you see it?"

"I did. And what's more, I've had enough."

"How enough?"

"I'm for getting out of here—"

With a sudden boldness, Forceps turned on the light again and flashed it around on every side.

The apartment was untenanted.

And they looked upon a startling sight.

Exactly what it was that was presented to their astounded gaze we reserve for the next chapter. But it was enough to startle even this burglarious duo.

"Maybe it isn't her room, though," said Forceps, in a suggestive tone.

"I don't care shucks if it isn't. If we are caught, maybe we'll have this murder to answer for too; and there's no telling whether we could positively get her out of the house without some noise. I say I'm for getting out of this."

"All right," assented Forceps, as the bull's-eye showed his face to be as white as that of his companion.

They retreated from the apartment, over the sill, along the narrow side yard, out into the adjacent alley and hurried to the open gate of Sandy's abode.

"Where's the gal?" Sandy immediately demanded, observing the large sack hung without anything in it on Forceps's arm.

"Never mind about the gal just now. Let's get up-stairs as fast as we can."

In the room, Forceps made the astonishing announcement:

"It's a miss, Sandy. No gal this time. She isn't there."

But they did not recount to him the terrible sight that had confronted them by the light of the bull's-eye.

"Tell you all about it to-morrow, old man. We are pretty badly frightened just now."

"Well, so long," and Sandy shuffled from the room in a puzzled condition of mind, while the two plotters sat down, facing one another across the table in silence, as if listening for something apprehensive to occur.

CHAPTER X.

A BEDROOM TRAGEDY.

INSTANTLY following the alarming outcry at the conclusion of Chapter VIII., there was a patter of running—unsteadily running—footsteps in the hallway.

Into the working-room burst Mrs. Duffy, her

face white as a sheet, and her mouth vainly trying to articulate.

Something terrible must have happened, was the thought in the minds of the girls, who stared at her, themselves partaking of the fright depicted in their employer's features, though at a loss to imagine what could have caused it.

One, who seemed to have more control of herself, asked, falteringly, as she bent and gazed as if fascinated into Mrs. Duffy's dilated eyes:

"What—what is it, madam—tells us? What has happened?"

The inquiry seemed to loosen the spell of horror that held the pale-faced woman's tongue.

She gasped forth a single word:

"Murder!"

Then she staggered back to a chair, clinging to its back for support as she showed signs of a coming swoon.

"Murder!" echoed the rest, now overcome with a sympathetic but indefinite horror.

Then:

"Oh, madam, tell us what it is?" exclaimed several, springing forward to support the sinking form.

"Murder! The new clerk! There's been an awful murder in my house. Oh, my, what shall I do?"

Now that they knew what it was that so terrified Mrs. Duffy, and perhaps prompted by an ungovernable curiosity, several immediately started on a run for the room they knew had been assigned to the new and beautiful clerk.

At the door, as they crowded forward, they paused, as had Mrs. Duffy, and gazed in unlimited horror upon a scene that surely indicated a recent and bloody murder.

The bed was almost dragged to pieces, the coverings lying scattered about the floor, as if there had been a severe struggle for life with the assassin.

On some of these there were red stains, no doubt from the warm veins of the lovely victim.

And one of the girls, as she glanced toward the disused fireplace, exclaimed:

"Look! Oh, look there!"

Before the tastefully decorated fireboard was a short piece of wood, reddened as if by more blood, and on the end of which all saw clinging a small tuft of hair, matted into the still wet stain.

Over the carpet, too, were stains that all realized must be blood—the blood of Julia Diering, the new clerk.

"Call a policeman!" cried one.

"Oh, I must run away from this! I can't work any more to-day!" broke from another, who, sickened by the suggestive sight, felt her head swimming in a sudden faintness.

Two of the more nervy in the bevy started briskly to summon a policeman; but the rest, overcome by the tragic occurrence, grasped their hats from their pegs and started off homeward to carry the remarkable announcement of a murder that had been committed at Mrs. Duffy's house.

Mrs. Duffy, by that time somewhat recovered, though still very white and trembling, herself made fast the store door and windows, returning after the task to the scene of the tragedy just as several policemen, headed by the sergeant, came in by the hall entrance, accompanied by the frightened girls who had apprised them of the occurrence.

There was scarcely any doubting the evidence contained in that room as to the fact of a most mysterious murder having been committed—highly mysterious, because the victim was not to be found either in the room or on the premises.

Investigation showed that the assassin must have effected an entrance by the low window opening on the yard, its sill being very little more than breast-high from the pavement; and the shutters, found open when the police arrived, had on them a stain or two of red, besides another stain on the sill, made, probably, when the bloody miscreant escaped by climbing out after doing his deed of violence.

The yard was examined, and this revealed another stain on one side of the gate-post—the gate being found unfastened also.

But where could the body of the victim be?

At the gate all trace was lost.

The room was closed, and the premises placed in charge of the police for the present, while the sergeant proceeded to ask Mrs. Duffy some questions.

"You said, madam, that you had only received the young lady supposed to be murdered into your employ yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Had she anything about her that could have induced such a deed as it seems has been committed so mysteriously?"

Mrs. Duffy hesitated.

"That the assassin must have been a man, a very powerful man, is apparent," the sergeant continued, "for he has carried off the body. His object being, I suppose, to secrete it and even if he should be suspected, he could not be convicted without its production. Why should he have sought to murder the young lady, can you imagine?"

"I think I can."

"Indeed?"

"My new and beautiful clerk was a young lady of considerable mystery," she said. "I employed her after she had answered an advertisement I had inserted in a Baltimore paper for a young lady having some knowledge of the millinery business, especially its clerical portion. She represented herself as capable of filling the situation and at the same time wrote that she was at the time without funds and anxiously seeking something by which she could support herself. I determined to give her a chance, although she had no recommendations. And when I saw her, and saw how beautiful and how willing she was, I at once liked her. But as I say, there was something very strange about her. She was not as poor as she represented herself to be. I found that she carried with her, in a common hand-sachel, a wealth in finely-cut diamonds. I am sure they could not have been worth less than eighteen to twenty thousand dollars."

The sergeant whistled lowly.

"I had determined to question her about this strange circumstance of her possession this morning," Mrs. Duffy added.

"Do you know where she kept the diamonds?"

"Yes."

"Show me their hiding-place, if you please."

She led the way to the closed room, before the door of which an officer was stationed.

Entering, followed by the sergeant, she advanced to the bed and raised the mattress.

"It is as I suspected," she said.

"What did you suspect?"

"The motive for the murder. The diamonds are gone. Poor thing! she has lost her life by being possessed of so much mysterious wealth. I am so sorry."

"The diamonds are gone?"

"Yes. They were here. My servant-girl discovered them last evening and informed me of the fact. I then came in here and examined them in her presence, hardly crediting her story at first regarding them."

"Your servant-girl, you say?"

"Yes," and Mrs. Duffy was struck by a peculiar accent to the inquiry, glancing quickly at him and adding:

"She cannot possibly know anything about the affair, for she is as scary as a sheep, and said to me at the time she informed me of their being here that she wondered I was not afraid of burglars breaking into the house."

"Where is the girl?"

"I will call her."

Pausing to send word to head-quarters by one of his subordinates, the sergeant accompanied Mrs. Duffy in her quest for the servant-girl.

Mary was singularly not to be found at her accustomed duties, nor was she in any portion of the lower building.

"I will look in her room, though she would hardly be there at this time of day. And I am a little surprised that this occurrence has not brought her forward with the others to see what has happened. Here is her room," as she paused and turned the knob of a door on the third floor.

In a far corner of the room, crouching close and low, they discovered Mary.

The girl had torn loose the knot of her hair and had it pulled down over her face as if to hide out some terrifying sight.

As they came in, she drew aside the hair, looking at them in a white, hunted way that was astonishing to Mrs. Duffy, but which instantly struck the officer with a peculiar significance.

In the next moment the girl had sprung to her feet, crying, as she ran toward them:

"You didn't come after me, did you? I didn't do it—no, no, no, I didn't do it! Oh, my heart! it's so awful! And it's all on account of her diamonds. Oh, my heart!"

"Do you know anything about it, my girl?" demanded the officer, somewhat sternly.

"No—no! Oh, I don't want to know. I want to fly away somewhere where I can forget this house forever!"

The sergeant tapped her authoritatively on the shoulder.

"Look up here. Answer me."

And when he held her under his keen eyes, he questioned:

"Are you sure—quite sure, mind—that you know *nothing* of the crime that you are afraid to tell?"

Something in his tone, in his steady glance, seemed to strike an additional terror into her soul, for she cried:

"I didn't do it! You think I did it! Oh, my heart! I didn't—I didn't—I didn't! Let me go away from here—"

"Nothing of the kind. You will remain."

Saying which, he beckoned Mrs. Duffy from the room, while the girl stood staring wildly at them, seemingly riveted to the floor.

But as the door closed after them, Mary ran forward and violently grasped the knob.

Then a cry burst from her that was an agonizing wail.

She was locked in!

"My heart!" she moaned, swaying to and fro

and wringing her hands. "I believe they think I am a murderess. I didn't do it! Oh, Heaven, I didn't do it!"

Outside the door, the sergeant said to Mrs. Duffy:

"Madam, have you any knowledge that any one could have known of these valuable diamonds being in the possession of the young lady, besides yourself and the girl you call Mary?"

"To the contrary, I am almost sure that no one else could know—at least, in this city," she added; "for Miss Diering informed me that no one knew of her address here excepting a young man, who was her affianced husband, and perhaps an old nurse who had nursed her in her infancy."

"A young man, eh?"

"Yes—and he was here only last night," she said, suddenly.

"Ah!"

"He came while she was out, and waited until nearly ten o'clock for her. I went up-stairs, leaving them together. At a little after eleven I came down, and found that he had gone and she had retired to her room."

"Can you give me some description of this young man?"

Mrs. Duffy had not taken a very close survey of Julia Diering's visitor, but she had seen sufficient of his face to give the sergeant a tolerably accurate description, which he very formally jotted down in his note-book.

He was an aspirant to appointment on the detective-police force of Philadelphia, and had done some pretty clever work in that line already, as his superiors had recognized.

In this instance, he was proceeding as if it was a foregone conclusion that he would be intimately mixed up in the search for the mysterious assassin, if not actually appointed to work out the whole trail.

Already he had formed two suspicions—very slight ones, to be sure: that perhaps the girl, Mary, or the young lover, might be concerned in some way with the crime.

At any rate, he had determined to detain the girl in custody, and to search for the lover.

In this latter he was not to have a very exciting chase.

As he and Mrs. Duffy came down the front stairs, the front door was opened by a policeman in answer to a summons at the bell, and a stranger entered.

The moment Mrs. Duffy's eyes rested on him, she said to the sergeant in an undertone:

"There he is now."

There was some surprise on the visitor's face at observing the policeman in the hallway, but he addressed Mrs. Duffy politely, saying:

"I have taken the liberty to call, madam, at the request of Miss Diering, to see her."

The sergeant advanced and laid a hand on his shoulder.

CHAPTER XI.

A PUZZLED DETECTIVE.

HAROLD HAMMOND did not flinch as the heavy hand of the officer of the law fell upon him.

He straightened up and cast a haughty, defiant look upon the sergeant, as he demanded:

"What do you mean by that, sir?"

"Perhaps the action ought to speak for itself, young man. I am an officer, and I think it my duty to arrest you."

"Arrest me? For what?" in unassumed astonishment.

"I can make no direct charge. But I deem it my duty to detain you at least until you can be questioned and can give a satisfactory account of yourself during the time between the hours of ten o'clock last night and this moment."

"I would like to know what this means?" and he glanced from the officers around him into the face of Mrs. Duffy.

"We are investigating the probable murder of Miss Julia Diering. And since you were one who was with her up to a rather late hour last night—and probably knew of the diamonds she had in keeping either for herself or some one else—"

Hammond broke in with an accent that could not be doubted for genuine pain and astonishment.

"What is that you say? The murder of Julia Diering? Oh, you are joking. Who would do such a thing? Why, I was with her last night until nearly eleven o'clock, having just arrived in the city from Washington, where, at my residence, I received a dispatch from her, dated Baltimore, telling me where to find her."

"I am not trying you for murder, young man. I only say that I have good cause to take you into custody during an investigation—as I shall most assuredly do with all those who had any knowledge that the lady possessed an enormous value of diamonds."

At this, Mrs. Duffy felt herself grow suddenly weak.

The remark implied that she, too, would be held for a hearing in connection with the mysterious affair.

"You will do well not to resist arrest," suggested the sergeant, warningly.

"Oh, I assure you I shall not resist. I have nothing to fear. I can easily account for my time after leaving Miss Diering."

But though he spoke confidently, he realized that the girl must indeed have been murdered, else these officers would not be taking such rigorous steps, and aside from a sudden agony which entered his soul and made his face look worn at such astounding intelligence, he comprehended that perhaps he might have to prove more than the occupation of his time after leaving the beautiful girl who had been his betrothed; he might also have to prove that the murder had not been committed while he was actually with her, or that he did leave her in health.

One of the policemen was dispatched upstairs to bring down the girl, Mary.

The sergeant himself took charge of Hammond, saying to Mrs. Duffy respectfully but firmly:

"You too, madam, will have to go with me and make your statements at head-quarters in regard to what you know of this. I would say to all, however, that in performing this, I am only doing what I think is my duty; I have, of course, no charges to make; probably your detention will not be for long."

A hack was called and the sergeant, accompanied by his three prisoners, drove off.

The millinery establishment of Mrs. Duffy was by this time the object of attraction and wonderment for the whole neighborhood and adjacent squares.

A curious crowd assembled on the pavement, as if expecting to learn of some developments regarding the mysterious murder.

At the preliminary examination, after the sergeant had stated all the circumstances which had come under his notice, the young man Hammond was immediately looked upon with considerable suspicion.

"You were an intimate friend of Miss Diering's?" he was asked.

"I was," Hammond replied, with as much composure as he could command in the presence of such an ordeal.

"Was there anything more than mere friendship between you?"

After a second's hesitation he replied:

"I have supposed myself honored by being a more than ordinary favored friend of hers."

"In what way?"

And as there was another and longer hesitation, he was interrogated again:

"Were you her accepted lover?"

"That is really too delicate a question for me to answer correctly in the absence of the lady herself."

"Umph! You say your business is that of a broker in Baltimore?"

"Yes."

"What particularly brought you to Philadelphia?"

"I came to see the young lady."

"Did she know of your intended visit beforehand?"

"I believe she did."

"You saw her?"

"I did."

"State under what circumstances."

And the questioner added, before Hammond could make reply:

"You can suit your own option about answering my inquiries, as you are not expected to criminate yourself—"

"I prefer to answer any and all questions you may choose to put to me," came the quick rejoinder. "I have nothing to conceal, and I desire a full investigation. When I called at the house which had been designated as the possible stopping-place of the young lady, in a communication from her to me, I did not find her at home. I entered and waited her return. It was late when she came in. We were together for a short time alone in the parlor; it was nearly eleven o'clock when I took my departure, I think."

"Was your meeting with her entirely cordial?"

"Perfectly so."

"If you had some proof of this, now—"

Mrs. Duffy bustled forward. Her face was very red.

She had taken a careful survey of Hammond, and with that inexplicable and impulsive intuition characteristic of women generally, had resolved in an instant to say something which, while it might embarrass her greatly would be of great benefit to the suspected man.

"I think I can tell something that will help to prove this young man's assertion," she said.

"Well, madam?"

And as her face grew even redder, she continued.

"Miss Diering was a new employee in my establishment. She was an entire stranger on coming there. She was to abide within my house. Her being out rather late, and the fact of a young man coming to see her before she had been an inmate of my house for twenty-four hours, caused me naturally to be alert for anything improper that might transpire. She had told me, however, that she was expecting a caller and that the gentleman would be her betrothed. I must confess, in the interest of this young man, that I

did something on that occasion which I never before did in all my life. I stole forward to the parlor door and listened for a minute or two. I will say—though I did not remain there longer than two minutes—that the meeting between the two was very tender and lover-like; though I will say, to the credit of both, that there was no gushing nonsense."

"That will do, madam."

There were further questions put to Hammond in regard to himself personally, after which the girl, Mary, was called.

Mary was in such a state of excitement that it was at first difficult to get any tangible answer from her.

She had been thoroughly alarmed by the action and looks of the brusque sergeant, and through this felt that every one considered her a murderer and robber.

Persistent kind assurances at last brought her into something like quietness, and she told the tale of the diamonds as she had discovered them, informed her employer, and led the latter to their hiding-place, where, after an examination of the jewels, they were restored exactly as found.

Subsequent to this she sought her bedroom, arising and proceeding about her duties as usual in the morning, not knowing anything at all about the tragedy which had occurred during her slumber until the commotion below brought her forward.

Immediately upon hearing what the trouble was, she was seized with an overpowering fear for herself, as she saw, in the knowledge she was known to possess in regard to the diamonds, perhaps a criminating clew that might result in her being arrested for the terrible crime.

In a panic of fear, she fled to the upper story, where she was afterward found, and further terrified so greatly that her actions seemed to fasten a proof upon her guilt or complicity.

Upon questioning Mrs. Duffy, the girl's story appeared to be truthful; her actions were attributed to a natural disposition to be easily frightened, and especially was she overwhelmed at the tragedy both having occurred in the same house with her and the fact of her knowledge of the existence of the diamonds.

Mrs. Duffy herself was next closely catechised.

An estimable woman always, and of high reputation, she had no difficulty in both clearing herself from any suspicion whatever in connection with the case; but her testimony appeared to be very favorable to the other prisoners.

She was a tolerably wealthy woman, and did not hesitate at the proper moment, after furnishing bonds for her appearance, if necessary, to do the same for the girl Mary.

These two withdrew from the station and were driven back to the house and store on South Sixth street.

A coroner had appeared there, meantime. But as there was no body to sit upon, of course there was no work for the coroner.

The rumor gained ground, at this, that the cunning assassin had in some way contrived to make off with the body, thus sheltering himself to a degree.

Two or three of the sewing-girls had ventured to return to the store, probably governed by curiosity more powerful than their recent alarm, and a chattering of female tongues made a buzzing sound throughout the dwelling.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS.

THOUGH Hammond sufficiently convinced the authorities of his responsibility personally and pecuniarily, he was detained longer, until dispatches could be exchanged between Philadelphia and Washington to substantiate the fact, and was released on his own recognizance.

Meantime, the detective police were given the case, with the few facts as elicited at the hearing.

The dailies soon grasped the item, and the evening papers contained an account, highly colored, of the murder that had been committed at the store of Mrs. Duffy, on South Sixth street.

Mark Magic, after a short nap and a good dinner at the Continental, was looking over one of the early afternoon papers, when he half-sprung to his feet, as he saw the paragraph, in boldly-headed type, telling of Julia Diering's supposed murder and disappearance.

Quick as a flash he recognized, he thought, the villainous handiwork of Berry Harper and his companion, Forceps.

He smiled grimly when he saw the announcement that the detective police had been put promptly on the case, that the red-handed miscreant would soon be run down, and so forth.

"They'll catch him, I imagine, about as much as a snail can catch a railroad train in full motion. I am the lark for this game, ahead of them all!"

Singularly, as some people would have thought, there was no mention made of the diamond robbery in connection with the tragedy, hence Magic did not know that the diamonds were missing; he did not know that they were in Julia's possession.

Hence his thought, as he hastened toward the millinery shop, that Julia Diering was not dead.

She had been spirited away, as she had expressed a fear she would be, by those who had made up their minds to wring a confession from her as to where the boy child was.

The blood-stains, the stick of wood with hair upon it—all were a blind; Julia was still alive.

Her abductors were Harper and Forceps.

Thus he was reasoning when he arrived at the home of Mrs. Duffy and was admitted by that lady.

"How do you do, madam. I have called professionally," he said, entering the hallway without ceremony.

"Are you one of the detectives?"

"I am—yes. I have called to take a little look into the matter here, and to get any information you may be able to give me, if you please."

Without any hesitation, she told him all that she had told the sergeant.

And here he met with an astonisher in the shape of the diamond discovery and their subsequent disappearance.

"The diamonds, you say, are positively gone?"

"Yes."

He was nonplused.

If the diamonds—for which Harper and his confederate were striving in their scheme against the girl—were missing, then they could not have wanted to abduct her to learn from her, by torture, where they were.

In the murder and robbery this object was accomplished.

It began to look as if she had indeed been murdered.

"I will take a look about, madam," he said, while his ever fertile brain was busy as with a knotty ball of stubborn facts which all his ingenuity seemed incapable of unraveling.

He examined the window, the yard, the gate, the stick with which the fatal blows had apparently been administered, and he asked:

"Did the sergeant you mention also observe all these things?"

"Yes."

"Do you know whether he made any other discoveries?"

"I cannot say as to that."

Magic had made two other discoveries than those we have seen come under the special notice of the sergeant, but he was careful not to betray this fact to Mrs. Duffy.

The stick with which it was supposed the assassin accomplished his ghastly work, was a portion of one of the bed slats.

It was hardly likely that the murderer would have stopped to extract one of the slats, take a part from it, commit the deed and then pause to return the slat to its place—this while possibly the girl was lying upon the bed asleep!

Outside the window there was a small space unbricked, as if there had been an intention at some time to start a flower-bed there. It was close to the window, and any one dropping or climbing from the sill would be apt to alight in the earth there.

A footprint would be made.

And a footprint Magic had discerned; an item which had escaped the eyes of the sergeant.

But it was not a man's footprint!

When satisfied that he could gather no more serviceable information from Mrs. Duffy, he took his departure.

His first move was to seek the low rum shop where he knew Harper and Forceps had taken up their abiding-place.

But when he entered, he was no longer Mark Magic to all appearances.

It was a half-intoxicated, roving, rollicking sailor who lurched forward to the bar, as if, under the influence of drink, he owned the whole premises, and bellowed, sonorously:

"Give way there, lads! Set us afloat and a-going! Pour out your bilge, old man—and everybody take a drink with Fo'cas! Bob—Grizzly Bob, who's guzzle's as deep as the hold o' the Lizzie herself. Float us all, old man. Come, you, an' join a sailor ashore!" and he tipsily beckoned to two men who sat at a greasy table at one side.

These two no less than the man Harper and his inseparable companion Forceps.

Sandy had at an early hour sought his two friends in the little private room. Indeed, it was doubtful whether he had slept at all through the remainder of the late night, and only waited for daylight to seek some explanation of the failure which had plainly been the lot of the two who had intended abducting the girl whose possession meant so much wealth to them.

"I won'er if them durned galoots is a-playin' me?" he meditated, aloud, as he washed his fat and bloated face at a tin bowl and wiped it on a coarse towel that might have been in service a month since it was last in the wash-tub. "I wouldn't like 'em fer to try that there on, I wouldn't. I'd make things purty hot fer Forceps, you bet. I ain't no guy fer to be fooled that-a-way; an' I'm a-wantin' to know more about the thing. Hav' they giv' up the racket altogether? If so, then, durn me if I don't

want to know where my twenty dollars is a-comin' from! I ain't got no twenty for to waste on even a old pal like Forceps. I'll just talk the thing over before I open the bar."

In shirt-sleeves and collarless, he went to the room.

He found them awake—indeed, they did not appear to have retired at all; their faces wore a dragged out and sleepy look, and in the eyes of each there was an expression very much like what would be found in the features of a criminal expecting to be pounced upon by the police at any minute.

"Say, you fellers, I don't altogether feel exactly right about this here thing. I want to know more about it, I do," he announced, a little sharply, as he entered.

"Hold on, Sandy," said Forceps, with a glance at the bottle on the table, which was now empty. "Bring us a stiffener first. We're all played out; haven't had any sleep. We'd have called you before this, only we didn't like to disturb you. Bring us up something, will you?"

"Oh, well, I'll do that."

When he had brought another bottle with some ice, he drew up a chair with a bump on the floor and seated himself squarely in front of Forceps.

"Now let's have the whole thing. What does it all mean, anyhow, that's what I want to know?"

"Old man," returned Forceps, as he wiped his dry lips after a heavy draught, "there's something happened that neither you could guess nor that we expected. Something it was that threw us all off our pins when we found it out, and actually scared us so that we couldn't talk much when we came in—though we didn't have any hand in it."

"Well, an' what was it 'at happened?" bluntly questioned Sandy.

"Instead of finding a girl to abduct, we found a bedroom splattered over with blood and no girl at all!"

Sandy's eyes opened. He was a hardened ruffian; but even with such as he, it was no light matter to be mixed up in a murder case. He stared at the speaker for a second silently. Then, with an oath, he blurted:

"Did you fellers go an' kill the gal?"

"No, no, we didn't have anything to do with it, I tell you; we didn't know anything at all about it until we saw the blood-stains all around the room. Then we up and scooted for all we were worth, lest something might occur to bring us in as parties to the affair. Our hands are clean, Sandy; but I don't want to be in such a fix in a hurry again."

An ugly scowl came over the saloon-keeper's visage.

"The gal's been murdered?"

"I guess so, by the looks of things in the room I took to be hers in the house we entered."

"You kin swear 'at you didn't do it?"

"Yes," answered both Harper and Forceps in a breath.

"Square?"

"Four corners all round—a regular cube, Sandy."

"Then that there racket o' yourn about gettin' the diamond's is busted, eh?"

And the scowl hardened.

"Well, for the present, old man, I don't know hardly what to say," Forceps replied, sullenly.

"I reckon I know what to say, though," quoth Sandy.

"What is it?"

"You two fellers owe me twenty dollars. I ain't got no twenty dollars to be a-givin' away fer nothink, I ain't. I'll jest keep them there togs o' yourn an' your frien's here till I see a sight fer that little amount. They may be worth the difference."

"Oh, that's all right. We'll soon be able to pay you back that much. You ought to know that a cracksman like I am won't be so very long out of a job. Keep them, Sandy, if you're agreed."

Perhaps the barkeeper had expected to make the other wince under the threat. The extreme coolness with which Forceps received the fiat of the situation was unlike the behavior of those who formed the gang making head-quarters at his place.

With these, he always managed to maintain the upper hand in some way and lorded it over the criminal humans after a fashion.

"Yes," supplemented Harper. "Keep the things, my friend. We'll soon have funds enough to pay you back the twenty, and you can continue to keep the duds if you want, for we'll get new ones."

"Oh, all right, if you're so awful willin'," said the man, though he would rather have had the money itself.

He descended and opened his grog-shop.

Harper and Forceps did not descend until later in the day.

They found Sandy engaged in reading over an account in the newspaper which gave thrilling particulars in regard to the murder—or supposed murder—at Mrs. Duffy's millinery store.

"Here's the whole racket, I reckon," he said, to the two, as they entered and advanced to the counter. "I've got through with it, an' you kin read it. If you fellers are mxd up into it, about the best thing 'at you kin do is to light out with what change you have left from that there twenty, or you'll find out 'at I was tellin' the truth when I said the police was takin' on a smart spell just about now, they are."

Receiving the paper from him, they retired to a table.

They had barely finished reading the article under the bold black head-lines, when the rollicking, drunken sailor made his appearance and filled the place with his boisterousness.

Forceps was inclined to accept the offer of the old grizzle-bearded Jack.

But Harper held him back, saying, for both:

"Drink your fill, old fellow; we've something else to attend to. Forceps, sit down."

"Oh, well, mates, if so be as you won't join, why, heave ahead your own channel, that's all. No offense—no offense!"

The sailor threw himself into a chair beside one of the tables—the one next to the pair who seemed to be interested in a newspaper that was spread before them.

"Set all sail, barkeeper!" called out the grizzle-bearded Bob, with a lurch in his seat.

"Fetch 'em along before the wind smart an' lively. What!" as an ordinary glass of toddy was set before him. "What! That! See here, matey, I wants something to keep the sun from settin' fire to my scuttle-top, I do. Bring your bilge in a tin cup, an' don't take too many hitches in the measure, d'ye hear?" and he pushed the glass aside disdainfully.

"Look a-here, have you got any money to pay fer this circus?" demanded the saloon-keeper.

Without a word, the sailor drew forth a handful of greenbacks and flourished them in the other's face for reply.

The tin cup was brought, with a copious mixture of toddy.

Then Bob Grizzly settled himself back for the enjoyment of a private spree, as if he was totally careless of the whole contents of the world.

Time and again the large cup was raised to his lips, and the barkeeper eyed him covertly with his own thoughts as to the remarkable foolishness of a man who would deliberately make a drunken idiot of himself.

For, reader, know ye, that though the barkeepers dispense the vile stuff with very willing hands, there is scarcely one among them who does not look upon their whisky-slavish customers as fools to the utmost!

Half drunk when he entered the place, and partaking apparently with a wonderful frequency of the toddy, it was only a matter of time before the hilarious Bob Grizzly became wholly inebriated.

There was suddenly a crash of chairs.

Head over heels went the sailor.

And as he struck the floor he lay there in an evident state of total insensibility.

But none of those present observed particularly that he had fallen in such a manner as to bring his head close to the legs of the table of the pair, Harper and Forceps.

Their conversation had been so low and at such a distance that the disguised detective could not hear a word that was said.

But now, after his purposely contrived accident, he heard Forceps suggest:

"Let's get out of here. The chances are that the fellow will presently have the delirium, and we may get into a scrape. Now more than ever do we need our best wits."

"Oh, bosh! He's done for—drunk as an owl in daylight. No danger even of his hearing a word we say. Come, Forceps, you have a longer head than mine, I know, in the end. What is to be done in this case? It beats me."

"Why, I am at as much loss as yourself. But I see one thing."

"What is that?"

"I can't be fooled by any such trick."

"Trick?"

"Yes. I don't believe the girl's been murdered at all. You know as well as I do that she is a very desperate thing just about now. She would do anything to escape from us. This murder affair is all a sham. She's gotten it up herself to delude us. I would be willing to bet my head that she is at this moment alive and well—hidden somewhere, if she has not already left the town—laughing at us for our being so easily outwitted."

"Do you really think so?"

"I do."

"What is our next move?"

"Play detective against the fellow who has contrived the plot for her."

"You think it has been contrived for her by that fellow who came over on the boat with us and whom we thought we had thrown overboard, when it was only some innocent party?"

"That's exactly my opinion."

"You say play detective. What do you mean?"

"Try and find the girl again, and prove that we haven't traveled the town all our lives for nothing."

"But where to begin?"

"I'll tell you. But not here. Come into the room," and rising, Forceps beckoned his companion from the saloon.

Harper followed silently.

When they had gone, the sailor gave signs of returning consciousness.

He gained his feet with a hiccup and a lurch that nearly sent him sprawling up against the bar.

Hitching at his breeches, he halloed:

"Heave ahead your own channel, mates, man the capstan an' up anchor. Away we go—away—away (hic)—before the completion of which utterances, he had reached and passed the door.

Into another saloon a few doors above he entered, but there was not the slightest sign of intoxication about his movements.

"Are you the proprietor?" he interrogated of a man with a very red face.

"Yahs, I wos."

"Just take charge of these duds for me for a little while, please, and I will pay you for your trouble."

Saying which, and in a trice, the sailor's garb disappeared, and Magic, by a few simple turns, had a bundle extended in his hands toward the astonished individual.

"Mine Himmell who you wos?"

"No matter, my friend. Please take charge of these, and here's a dollar for your trouble."

Without waiting to see whether the German would accept of the charge or not, he hurried from the saloon and toward the millinery shop of Mrs. Duffy.

He had discovered one thing that was conclusive to his mind.

The rogues, Harper and Forceps, were not parties to the mystery of the supposed murder.

A quick glance which he had given at the newspaper they had been engaged in looking at, while seated at the table, told him that their conversation was based upon the paragraph concerning the mysterious murder of Julia Diering.

As he approached the door of the shop—which had now been reopened by the proprietress—a young man was just leaving.

It was Harold Hammond.

Mrs. Duffy beckoned to the detective.

CHAPTER XIII.

A MYSTERIOUS ADVERTISEMENT.

STEPPING forward in answer to the beckoning finger of Mrs. Duffy, that lady addressed Magic simply:

"Here's the young man who was paying attentions to my clerk.

Hammond colored a little at the allusion to himself as "the young man" and to his betrothed as a "clerk."

"He's one of the detectives," Mrs. Duffy added, to Hammond.

"Then I would like to speak with you," said Hammond, descending from the steps.

"What can I do for you?" asked Magic.

"A great deal, perhaps. Can I have a short conversation with you in private?"

"Certainly."

They walked off northward, and as they went Hammond said:

"You are working on this mysterious case, of course?"

"I am. And I understand that you were with the young lady up to a late hour last night?"

"I was. Can I confide something very private to you—something sacredly private?"

"You can."

"I have been considered Miss Diering's betrothed husband by many persons where I have met her. I am not such, because I have no right to be. But it has been my hope to so arrange matters to release her from her present marriage vows as will enable her to accept me as her husband. God knows she has sufficient ground for a divorce, but she is so very timid that she hesitates to take the step I have been urging for some time."

Magic pricked his ears.

Was the beautiful Julia deceiving him or this young man who was evidently in love with her? She had told him, Magic, that her divorce had been procured. What object could she have in deceiving Hammond, if she truly loved him?

"Well?" said Magic, indefinitely.

"I want to engage you to sift this matter."

"In what way?"

"I want you to find Julia Diering."

"Find her!" in simulated astonishment.

"Why, is it not a foregone conclusion that she has been murdered?"

"I do not think so."

"What are your grounds?"

"I know that Julia was fleeing—constantly fleeing—from the man who is her husband, and at whose hands she expected to receive a terrible personal injury of some kind. I have conceived the notion that Julia has done this herself—probably finding that her enemy was too close at hand—to mislead him. But the strange part of it is that she has not left nor arranged by any means a message to inform me of her direction in the flight she has so suddenly taken."

"Do you believe that Julia Diering is still alive?" asked the detective, slowly.

"I am so sure that I could almost swear it."

"You know her husband, of course?"

"I do not. She would never tell me who he was."

Here was another contradiction.

It was hardly likely that two men—as was the case according to Julia's statement to him—would be suing for the same woman's hand without each knowing of his rival, if the suit was conducted with ardor on each side, as Julia had given the detective to understand it had been.

He began to doubt now the sincerity of the story, in some particulars, told him by the lovely girl.

"What is it you wish me to do?" he asked again.

"I want you to help me find Julia Diering. And I must tell you another thing if you are willing to accept a case from my hands."

"I will accept the case—if you have such good reasons to believe that she is still alive."

And as Hammond hesitated for a second, he added, inquiringly:

"What is it you have to tell me? Everything must be told that can help the case, you know."

"Her name is not Julia Diering."

"Ah?"

"She was a native of Washington city. Her father, before he died, was one of the employees of the District Commissioners. He was rather a poor man; yet he endeavored to make a show in society. That endeavor ruined him. She married, and her marriage turned out to be one of those unfortunate marriages for which the capital is noted of late years. The husband was a vile thing as I understand from her; she has been a much persecuted woman. I met her and I loved her. She was already separated from her husband; but she has not so far consented to an application for a divorce, in order that she may accept my offer of heart and hand. I love her, I tell you; and if I can only persuade her to get rid, by law, of this incubus, I shall be a very happy man, for I know she will marry me at once. Will you find Julia Diering?"

"I will find the young lady for you, if she can be found. But one thing?"

"What is it?"

"You have not told me her real name?"

Another hesitation.

"Her name is Beryl Pearl."

"An unusual name," commented Magic.

"Yes." And Hammond added: "I will pay you five thousand dollars if you will find her—supposing her to be alive. I have wealth, and if your search shall require more than that amount, I am willing that my offer should not interfere with expenses. Is that fair enough?"

"Fully so. I will endeavor to work the case, and communicate with my chief at once."

"You mean the chief of police or some private detective agency in Philadelphia. Well—"

"No, I belong to Baltimore. I have been on the track of this young lady for some time."

"On her track?" in surprise.

"She was suspected of being a little crooked when in Baltimore. I was started out to watch her and ascertain what I could—"

Hammond interrupted by grasping the hand of Magic, saying:

"I am glad to hear that. I have a profound respect for the detectives of Baltimore. Do you know why? I'll tell you. There has never yet been any sustained charges against them as officers in the discharge of their duties as in other cities. I am glad that in seeking detective aid, I met you. It is a bargain between us."

"Pardon me, Mr. Hammond, but you are an entire stranger to me," suggested the detective.

"If you will call at the marshal's office you will find an almost complete record of myself, gleaned when I was detained this morning in connection with this mysterious affair. I am a responsible party, as you will find."

"Where are you residing?"

"The American."

"You will probably hear from me."

During the conversation, they had gone a considerable distance along Sixth street.

At a corner Magic thus brought the interview to an abrupt close, shaking hands with the young lover and departing in an opposite direction, with a feeling, based upon his knowledge of human nature, that Hammond was really in the dark concerning the mystery of Julia Diering, and was in earnest when he offered the reward for her finding.

At that moment he had entirely given up the theory that Harper and Forceps knew anything about the girl.

Visiting the office of the marshal, he satisfied himself by the record that Harold Hammond was "all right."

Then he started out upon one of the blindest trails that he had ever encountered since his entrance into the mystic profession.

His first act was to telegraph from the counter of the Continental to his chief at Baltimore.

The tenor of the dispatch was briefly thus:

"I have found the 'case.' Amore difficult one than could possibly have been imagined at the first. Five thousand reward in it. More anon. MAGIC."

Magic now wanted some little time to think.

How was he to go about the finding of the beautiful Julia Diering? Perhaps she had left town altogether, without the slightest trace of her course—supposing the theory of Hammond, and indeed his own theory, to be correct.

In the broad bar-room of the hotel he bought a paper and threw himself into one of the leather chairs, ostensibly to read, but in reality to ponder.

The paper he held happened to have the advertisement side out; his eyes idly passed over the stereotyped appearance of the column of "Wants," when—

Lo!

Keen ever, he saw something that struck him as one of the most peculiar advertisements he had ever seen.

Absorbed though he was with the matter in hand, he could scarcely have avoided noticing what was presented in the following unusual lines:

"WANTED—At once. Two superior ushers, experienced. House ornamental garden-hands. Superintendent of callers. Two experienced waiters. Two ladies for private piano concerts. Also communications with florists, for decorative supplies. Two private messengers with undoubted reference as to ability to obey orders. Apply at No. — Chestnut street any hour between ten A. M. and four P. M."

"Somebody is going to give a grand party," was the detective's thought.

He bought a cigar and sauntered out in the direction of the house whose number was given in the paper, desiring to take a glance at what he supposed was to be the place of a nabob affair.

To his surprise, he saw workmen engaged in planting highly ornamental electric lights before the mansion in question—for it was indeed a colossal establishment, with massive steps and doorway, with brilliant vestibule and an interior that a beholder might picture as full of strangely beautiful adornments.

"Who lives here?" he asked of the man who seemed to be superintending the management of the work.

"The wealthiest lady in Philadelphia, I reckon, by the way she orders things, and the most beautiful one you ever set your eyes on. There she comes now. She is looking over everything that's being done herself. She's full of business, I tell you."

He pointed to a handsomely caparisoned pair of gray horses that were prancing along toward the house at the moment, the richly decorated barouche behind them containing but a single occupant.

This a woman, whose loveliness was fully proportionate to the expression of the boss mason.

Magic cast a covert but keen glance at her.

And in his heart he started.

He was sure he knew the person in the barouche.

But no—the young lady there was an exquisite blonde, with a wealth of golden tresses conspicuously displayed.

Only the eyes had seemed to strike Magic as eyes that he had certainly gazed into before.

She alighted and entered the building, evidently on a tour of inspection.

Something seemed to hold him. He stood for several moments as if undecided whether to proceed on his way or remain for the beauty to come forth again.

But a car happening to pass eastward at that moment, he jumped onto it and returned to the hotel, his mind filled with the stubborn thought that he had certainly seen the beautiful blonde somewhere before.

"I will find out what is going on at that house," he resolved, as he returned to the reading-room; and so strong was this new feeling upon him—as if by an inexplicable influence—that he for the moment forgot the prior matter in hand of looking for mysterious Julia Diering.

"Have you decided upon anything yet?"

The voice was at his elbow.

Seldom was Magic so off his guard as to permit of any one approaching that close without his knowledge.

Harold Hammond was standing beside him.

"I want you to keep close to me," said the detective, speaking, as he afterward confessed as if under the influence of some power which could never be explained. "I think I have discovered something, and yet do not know why I think so. Change your hotel. Come here, and I want you to help me fathom a mystery."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE COUNTESS DE PULLIER.

"I WANT you to help me fathom a mystery," said young Hammond, in response to the detective's speech of a similar character.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I have seen Julia Diering."

"Indeed," and Magic opened his eyes, as if he was greatly surprised.

For instantly upon hearing the words, he had thought he had solved the mystery of the blonde.

"I saw her distinctly pass along Chestnut street not half an hour ago in an open barouche

and attired richly. But I noticed another thing."

"What?"

"Every particle of habiliment upon her was what is called ready-made, though of rich quality."

"You are a keen observer."

"Not particularly so, when I tell you that I was once a clerk in one of Baltimore's ladies' clothing houses. I can detect such suits the instant I see them. Julia is still in the city. She is playing some deep game in which she evidently will not even permit me, her idolator, to share."

"Describe the lady as you saw her, please—also the kind of conveyance she occupied."

Hammond did so.

It tallied exactly with the lady and the barouche that Magic had casually observed at the strangely advertising-house on West Chestnut street.

He did not say to Hammond, however, that he had seen the same party.

He only repeated his previous remark:

"Come here. I want you to help me to fathom a mystery."

"Then you have discovered something?"

"I never tell everything I have discovered. Do as I say if you want me to help you."

"I will be guided by you."

Hammond immediately returned to the American and settled up his bill, ordering his small trunk sent to the Continental.

When he arrived there and was registered, however, he found that the detective was nowhere to be found.

He paced the space between the counter and the elevator impatiently as night drew down, expecting each minute to see the man he had employed to hunt for Julia Diering.

But Magic did not make his appearance.

There were many answers to the advertisement that had appeared and which had at first attracted the attention of Mark Magic, as he looked over the columns of the paper listlessly.

He had resolved, as shown, to keep an eye on the mystery of No. — Chestnut street.

While Hammond was looking for him, he was in the vicinity of the house, and he was surprised at the appearance of things; for the electric light men had lost no time; the place was ablaze; and the sound of music was pouring from the half-open windows.

The massive door was open and the vestibule adorned with the rarest exotics and attractive plants of domestic beauty.

Inside, the rays of chandeliers sent a brilliant gleam out to the street, and evidently the advertiser must have procured the performers on pianos for private concert, for the music was solely of that kind.

Inhabitants of the immediate neighborhood, themselves of the wealthier class, were in astonishment at this remarkable innovation on the hitherto quiet precinct of their dwellings, and many a merchant, detained down-town later than usual, paused on his doorstep to look and wonder what had suddenly sprung up in their midst.

As Magic stood looking, as if he was an utter stranger to the vicinity and, indeed, a countryman by the way he stared, a man came up to him and said:

"Are you going in?"

"In where?"

"Why, into Madame Constance's."

"Who is Madame Constance?"

"Pshaw! you can't make believe to me. Come; I know you were hesitating."

"My friend," said Magic, with the most innocent air imaginable, "I don't know anybody by the name of Constance, and I was only stopping to look at this new improvement to the neighborhood."

He raised his hat in a polite manner, and passed on.

But in the shadows, that were beyond the entrance to this brilliantly-illuminated house, he paused to look back.

He saw the man who had accosted him withdraw back in the direction whence he had come.

And hardly had he made a mental note of this when he was accosted by another personage, saying:

"Don't be afraid; it's all right, young man. You can go in if you want to; and if you're not acquainted, I'll introduce you."

This second party did not stop, but passed on and entered the house, where the sweet notes were coming forth in such strains as might have captivated any lover of piano music.

"It's a racket of some kind, and I'll see it," resolved Magic, quietly, as he leisurely turned away and walked to the next corner.

Too old a hand was he to pass the hints thrown out by the two decoys.

And he thought to himself that if the occupant of the new and magnificent establishment did not conduct her business through more experienced hands, she would have a short shrift.

Ten minutes later, there was a decidedly Southern-looking young man approaching the steps of the house.

The two decoys started to assume the same

role that had transpired when Magic had come there in his own proper person.

But the Southerner coolly ascended the steps, casting a glance of surprise upon them, and entered the mystic portals.

Inside he was met by an usher, who had nothing to say, but who led the way, bowing, to the parlor.

A very beautiful and young girl was at the piano, playing a sweetly operatic air.

Upon his entrance, another came forward as if to greet him.

And she—

The most ravishingly-beautiful being Magic had ever beheld.

It would be impossible to describe her dress—only her face is within the limit of the author's ability.

Backed by an opulence of hair so golden that it appeared to shed a shower of the precious metal below her shoulders, bare and white, and at the front upon a brow untouched by the slightest brushing of artificiality, a cluster of ringlets that were as if made there by the liberal nature that made the entrancing being herself, there stood forth a face that was a picture such as painter had never yet dared to place upon canvas for fear he would offend the taste of people who want things to suit fashion and not true loveliness.

Her eyes were of a bewitching hazel, liquid and sparkling alternately, and instantly riveting upon one with a pleasant steadiness. The gaze was accompanied by a smile that displayed, just the slightest, a pearly outline beneath the red lips.

And the color of eyes, softness of complexion, drooping lashes and delicately arched brows, in contrast with the golden and wavy tresses, formed altogether a picture that was a study.

Her carriage was one of supremest ease, her mien one of complete self-confidence; and as she glided forward to greet the visitor, her movement was of almost faultless grace.

The usher remained standing until he saw the mistress extend her jeweled hand to the comer, then withdrew.

"I welcome you, sir," she said, sweetly. "You are the first to call upon me. And I am a little surprised, too, for you could hardly have seen my advertisement yet."

"Your advertisement, madam?" he rejoined, inquiringly, as he bowed courteously over the hand he was permitted to touch.

"Yes, for I only sent it to the papers late this afternoon."

"I hope I have not intruded here? But the open appearance of your residence, the music, in fact every appearance led me to suppose at first that I had found some pleasantly popular and public resort long known."

"Oh, it is by no means long known," she said with a merry little ripple of laughter. "I have only become its mistress on this very day. You are wondering what it can be—this house—myself, no doubt. Well, I shall gratify your curiosity, for it will be no secret after the papers are out on the morrow. You are a Southerner, I presume," casting her lovely orbs over him searchingly.

"I am. My name is James Gorsuch. I am from Atlanta."

"And I am Madame Constance, Countess de Puillier."

"Ah, a Parisian?"

"No, not I. My husband, the count, was. He is now dead. Perhaps you will say that I have inaugurated an innovation when I tell you of my little Parisian scheme to support myself—for I must admit to all with whom I come in contact—as some excuse for the business I am about to engage in—that the count died very poor, after having squandered my whole fortune. But come, as you are my first caller, let me devote myself to showing and explaining to you my object here. Perhaps you will prove a friend and assist me in the future, even if you do not patronize me yourself," saying which, she quietly placed her hand upon his arm, with the additional remark:

"You shall not object to looking over my establishment while I introduce myself to you more fully?"

"I am entirely at your service," he said, admitting to himself that he was considerably mystified.

Then she led him across the magnificently furnished parlor to the hallway and up the staircase.

At the foot of the balustrade was a tiny bell arranged on the carved pillar. This she tapped twice.

At the sound of the bell, a tall and sable African appeared before them with the suddenness of a jack-in-a-box.

As they went up the stairs, the disguised detective observed that this black-faced personage followed.

The countess now lowered her voice so that the attendant in the rear could not overhear.

"I am a countess," proceeded to say the beautiful woman. "But a comparatively very poor one. I have my living to make in this great world, and I am unfortunately unfitted for any manner of work. By my wits, then, must I eke out that which is necessary. Hav-

ing heard of this splendid residence, which contains no less than twenty rooms, all handsomely furnished, I called upon the agent and ascertained that it was for rent as it was, wholly and for an indefinite period, unless sold, and the owner is desirous of selling. I examined it; it suited my purposes admirably. I have rented it, and as I will shortly be in funds by a relative who has left me a large amount in the West, I may eventually purchase it."

"You have perhaps a very large family?"

"Oh, scarcely any at all. Only my child and his nurse."

"Then, if I may be permitted the question, why take so large an establishment?"

"That is just what I shall explain to you. And as I know that all Southerners are chivalrous, you may feel inclined to help me in attaining my object. Will you look at these bedrooms?"

She half-paused in the upper entry and waved her hand toward the open doors of large, breezy, comfortable-looking bed-chambers, comfortably and richly arranged at the same time.

"The next floor above is similarly furnished throughout," she pursued. "And if you will step this way, I will give you a glimpse of the garden."

She led him out upon a narrow balcony where in the pale moonlight he could see below the shady labyrinth of a neat garden, whence came the faint ripple and plash of fountaining waters."

"And now, Mr. Gorsuch, to speak of my business. I have thought to call my establishment 'The Bachelors'."

"The Bachelors'?"

"Yes."

"Why the name?"

"Because," and she interpolated a little laugh, "I am going to keep a hotel."

"A hotel?"

"Exactly. The rooms I have shown you and mentioned, I purpose letting to single gentlemen of undoubted reputation and of a class who can pay for such accommodations as I can offer. Many would prefer one of my rooms at ten or twelve dollars a week to the noisy atmosphere of a hotel—"

"You do not mean including their board?"

"Oh, not at all. I shall not keep a boarding-house. Only the rooms are for rent. You have seen; I shall have music in the evenings; I have a pleasant garden; the room of the buffet will be convenient; in short, those who patronize me will have a place of rest where they will be comparatively their own masters, and I shall take such precautions as are necessary to preserve the reputation of my establishment in every degree."

CHAPTER XV.

MAGIC "CHANCES ONE."

"I AM having prepared, also," continued the countess, "a reading, smoking and card-room, separate, where the gentlemen can enjoy themselves in their usual way, if their habits should so incline. No ladies will enter into the arrangements in any way save in that you have seen, to perform during certain evenings upon the piano. Between the gentlemen and that person there will be positively no acquaintance allowed, and as I shall myself be present, or my ushers, continually, there will be no opportunity for sly flirtations, you see. Now what do you think of my plans?"

"I think they are decidedly novel, madame, and perhaps, if conducted with the care you promise, you may succeed."

"I am very confident."

"You have asked me to perform the part of a friend, I understood, a moment ago?"

"Yes, I shall be very glad if you will assist me in so far as you may deem proper."

"Then I have a suggestion to make."

"I shall be glad to hear it."

"Have you any other view to the course for obtaining patrons than by the advertisement you have given to the newspapers?"

"Yes, I have employed two agents who shall make it their business to investigate the characters of such as may apply for admittance to 'The Bachelors,' and to them I have agreed to pay a certain per cent. until the rooms are filled."

The detective instantly saw through the bold endeavor of the two men he had at first encountered on the outside.

"Madame, I fear you have made a slight mistake at the start."

"What is it?" and her tone showed that she was ignorant of having done so.

"Those two men are rather about to ruin your business than conserve it."

"How?"

"The quiet folk of Philadelphia may even as it is not take quickly to your Parisian plan; and they will assuredly give you the utter go-by when they find that these two men whom you have employed are nightly on your pavement, or near it, soliciting callers for you in a manner somewhat like the crier at the door of some third-rate museum."

"Why, sir, what do you mean?"

He explained to her in a few words what had transpired when he approached the house; for he

believed that this beautiful countess was totally ignorant of the false step in her enterprise.

And he discovered immediately that she was a woman of prompt action at least, for she said, with a voice that was peculiarly quiet:

"Be kind enough to step down-stairs again with me, and I will show you that I am in honest earnest in my attempt to establish a respectable and attractive private hotel."

Arm in arm they descended, the sable attendant keeping still respectfully near, as if performing guard over the movements of his mistress.

At the foot of the staircase, she again tapped the bell that rested upon the pillar-post. This time thrice.

A youth appeared, coming from a side room at the rear of the spacious hall.

Addressing him rapidly, she said:

"You remember the two gentlemen you saw in conversation with me this afternoon on the veranda?"

"Yes, madame."

"Go out upon the street and look a short distance in both directions. If you see them or either one of them, send him or them to me here instantly."

"Yes, madame," and he hastened off.

"We will go in here," she said, to the detective.

They entered another side room on the opposite side of the hall to the long saloon parlors where the melodious notes of the piano still sounded enticingly.

This apartment was furnished much like a business man's office, with desk, book-case, leather and cane chairs and the usual paraphernalia for counting-room transactions.

The countess threw herself into a chair at the desk and sat in silence facing the door.

The boy dispatched to the front had executed his errand easily.

He returned within five minutes, accompanied by both parties.

Madame Constance received them with a cold bow and did not ask them to be seated.

"I have sent for you," she said, "to tell you that I can dispense with your services, to pay you for the time you have devoted to an attempt to injure my business and have done with you entirely—"

"Why, countess!" exclaimed one. "What does this mean?"

"My words were very plain, I think. How much are your services worth for the few hours you have been in my employ?"

"But I can't stand that, you know!" blustered the other of the pair. "You engaged me at least until you had filled your rooms."

"And me."

"Yes, until you had filled my rooms with gentlemen of reputation; instead of which you are endeavoring to bring an odium upon me and my enterprise."

"Who says so?"

The countess was silent. She hesitated to name her new-found acquaintance as her authority.

But our detective promptly relieved her of any embarrassment in this particular.

"I am the informer, sir," he said, quietly.

A quietness that was very deceptive, for the man at once concluded that he could browbeat the Southerner with impunity.

"You did, eh? Well, you're a meddling dandy, do you know that? Who are you, anyhow?"

"Magic arose very coolly."

"I am your superior, sir, as a gentleman—your master if you act the puppy in the presence of this lady."

And turning to the countess, he added:

"Madame, in view of your endeavor to establish a respectable hotel, and the fact that these two parties have sought to undermine you in that regard, I must inform you, if you do not know it, that they cannot really claim anything from you; instead, they are at this moment liable to prosecution—"

"I won't stand this!" blurted the taller man of the two.

"You are disposed to take advantage of the lady, I see, because you think, or did think, that she was both a stranger in the city and one without any friends. I take pleasure in saying that I am decidedly her friend, and it is through me that she will now command you—if you know when you are well off you will obey, too—to leave this house instantly, and be careful that you do not attempt anything further against her interests or you will be promptly handed over to the police—"

"Why curse your interference!" and the fellow sprang forward with upraised arm and clinched fist.

The fist came down.

But its owner was slightly surprised.

A gripe like the gripe of a vise caught his wrist, and in a trice he was wrenched around and almost hurled to the floor, in the same manner as we have seen the detective manage the belligerent Harper on the boat.

On this occasion, however, Magic put even more strength into his grasp, and the man uttered a sharp exclamation of pain.

But Magic did not stop here.

Holding the fellow thus, with one arm twisted painfully behind his back, he rapidly and irresistibly forced him from the room out along the hall to the doorsteps and down these he sent him at one wild leap, which he was compelled to take to save himself from falling upon his face on the pavement.

The other individual had been a silent and astonished spectator to this performance.

He saw that this rather small-tatured personage who had proclaimed himself the friend of Countess Constance was a practically muscular and coolly-determined man.

He instantly changed his tone, and said, when they were thus placed momentarily alone:

"But, countess, 'tisn't fair, you know. I haven't had half a show to aid you. I didn't mean to injure you."

"Then you have yourself to blame for your own ignorance in regard to what I required of you, after I had given explicit instructions—"

"But, don't I get any money at all?"

"I shall be guided by the advice of the gentleman whom you have seen eject the ungentlemanly partner of yours."

"But I say, countess, it isn't fair, and I won't stand it. If you treat me this way, I'll—"

"What will you do?" asked the voice of the quiet-mannered Southerner, as he re-entered the room.

And he said to the countess:

"Shall I send him after his partner in a similar manner, madame," bowing as if awaiting her commands.

There appeared to be no need of this.

One quick glance the fellow gave. Then with lips that mumbled inaudibly and ragefully, he hastened from the room and from the house.

"I do not think they will annoy you, further, madame. They have laid themselves liable to prosecution under the circumstances, and now that they know you are aware of the fact, they will not risk their liberty or take the chances of punishment by attempting any more damage."

"I am exceedingly grateful," said the countess, smiling sweetly. "I hardly would have known exactly what to do but for you."

"Do not mention it. And now, if you please, let us talk a little business. You have your register there upon the desk, I perceive?"

"Yes," expectantly.

"I shall be the first applicant, then, I presume, for a place as guest in your novel hotel. I rather like your idea. I shall try and aid you to fill your rooms, where it may be an effort within such bounds as the intended reputation of your establishment will permit. What are your terms?"

"Oh, but you have not yet made a selection of your room."

"That need not matter. I leave the assignment to you—only saying that I do not want to go very high, since you have no elevator, and I rather prefer a secluded section to one of prominence. I leave the assignment entirely to you," he repeated.

The countess opened the huge ledger in a business-like manner and wrote down his name as he had given it to her, with a number opposite to the name.

From a convenient rack she took a key.

"You have not told me the charge, madam?"

"How long will you probably remain with me?"

"Not for a shorter time than one week, and very likely longer. I will in the morning present you with letters of introduction which I brought with me from Atlanta."

"I shall be glad if you will. For though I have not the slightest doubt that I am dealing with a true gentleman, I desire to carry out the formality which I decided should be my rule. The room I have selected for you will, I think, give you satisfaction. The charge is ten dollars per week. Do you wish to take possession at once?"

The countess was now talking straight business, and though very agreeable in manner and voice, her former witchery had seemed to depart in a degree for the time.

"I would like to see the room, so that I may find it without disturbing others when I do come. I will hardly take full possession till morning."

She stepped forth to the bell, giving it two taps.

The sable African appeared and at a sign from her conducted the first guest of the house up to his room.

The countess parted with him, with a graceful bow.

"Your mistress said something about there being a buffet in the house?" he remarked to the servant.

"Yes, sah. Have something, sah?"

"Bring me a julep."

"Yes, sah," as he received the dollar note given him.

When the julep was brought to the room, it was beyond dispute as handsome and relishable a draught as Magic had ever seen mixed.

But the African said, with just the slightest grin, as he withdrew:

"No change, sah."

Magic whistled lowly.

"The countess has made up her mind to accumulate some money, I see," he addressed himself, when alone.

Then, after a few sips at the julep, he set the glass on the center-table and seated himself in a thoughtful mood.

He had considerable to think about just then.

He felt that he had made a strange discovery.

CHAPTER XVI.

A STORY FROM THE SOUTH.

In the first moment that Magic had set eyes on the lovely Countess de Puillier, he believed that he stood face to face with the mysterious Julia Diering.

But as she talked, and as he marked her demeanor, he came to the conclusion that it could hardly be Julia.

The points of resemblance were many, it was true; but then, Julia had very dark hair; her manner was very subdued, with none of the bewitching ease and agreeably entertaining quality with which the countess seemed to be ready to greet whoever should call upon her.

This beautiful wife of the dead Count de Puillier was a cross of blonde and brunette; Julia Diering was a lovely girl of surely lesser years and of an easily discernible retiring disposition, so far as Magic had had opportunity to judge.

But in that transient interview which she had compelled with her untrustworthy employees, he had seen something which had again sent the thought through his mind that it was Julia Diering in this remarkable disguise.

When she had addressed the men, her mouth assumed that firm, half-stern compression which he had noted in the face of Julia Diering at the time when he spoke with her at Mrs. Duffy's store.

And the countess had deliberately mentioned having no family save a child and its nurse—another circumstance that tallied with the item of a child in Julia Diering's life.

It was under this influence that he had resolved to become an inmate of the novel hotel which the countess had expressed an intention of inaugurating if she could.

He must know whether his suspicions had good ground or not. Magic was prepared to admit to himself that she was one of the most clever women he had ever met with.

Finishing his julep and pausing long enough to take some observations in connection with his appointed surroundings, he went out, locked the door and descended the handsome staircase.

The countess observed him as he was passing the parlors, she being at the moment in conversation with the young lady at the piano while that feature of her establishment was indulging in a restful pause.

Coming forth, while she detained him by a wave of her fan, she said:

"You will remember, Mr. Gorsuch, that the parlors, the whole house, is at the disposal of those who may become my guests. I have only to remind you that any conversation with that young lady, or any attentions toward her of any kind, are strictly forbidden. Among gentlemen, that ought to be sufficient."

"Quite so, madame. I shall not forget the reminder."

Leaving the blaze of madame's house, Magic entered a car and proceeded down to the Continental.

The hour was then growing late.

But Harry Hammond, who had learned by several inquiries that Mr. Mark Moreley had not yet come in—the name Magic had assumed upon going to the hotel—was still pacing unrestedly before the reading-room and the counter alternately.

He did not of course recognize the detective in his make-up as the Southerner.

Magic tapped him on the arm.

"Come with me," he said.

"Who are you, sir?"

"Mark Magic. Come!"

He led the way out to the Sansom street pavement, where he quickly dispensed with his few features of disguise.

"I never would have known you!" exclaimed the surprised Hammond, as he saw the detective convert his southern-looking slouch into a smaller and round top-hat, while, with the addition of gray whiskers and a turning of the coat he once more stood forth as Mr. Moreley, the little old gentleman.

"I suppose not," said Magic. "I do not disguise myself so that others can readily recognize me. But come up to my room now. I think I have made a little discovery."

Procuring his key, Magic led the way to the elevator.

When alone together in the room, Magic said:

"I have still a further clew to the fact that Julia Diering may be alive."

"You say a further clew?"

"Yes."

"Did you have any previous clew?"

"Oh, yes!"

"You have been reticent, then, in regard to it."

"It is the way of my profession."

"What was that other clew?"

"Simply that I discovered, when conducting

my investigations at the millinery shop of Mrs. Duffy, that the person who clambered forth from the window at that house into the backyard must have been a female," and he explained about his finding the footprint in the narrow flower-bed, concluding with—

"And now I am quite sure that the footprint was made by Julia Diering in her flight."

"It is an item," admitted Hammond. "I am very glad to find you sanguine, with myself, that Julia is still alive. But do you think we shall ever find her?"

"The chances are that I have already found her."

Hammond instantly became excited.

"Where is she? That is, where do you think she is?"

"Keep cool, my friend. We detectives do not do things headlong. I say I think I have found her; I did not say that I had found her."

"But put me in the way of knowing where you think she is—"

"It is in regard to the circumstance I wish to speak. If I am to prosecute this search, you must allow me to do so in my own peculiar way. To aid me, which I suppose you wish, you must be guided by me. If the young lady I suspect to be Julia Diering suspects that I have penetrated her disguise, she will probably flee again. And I trust you will pardon me if I speak plainly and say, that for some cogent reasons of her own, she has decided to throw you over."

"Throw me over?"

"Get rid of you—"

"I won't believe it!" declared the young man vehemently. "Julia loves me; she is not my wife at this moment because the law will not permit her to marry me. You do not know her; she is a poor innocent, persecuted woman. And as soon as I can persuade her to obtain a divorce, she will be mine."

"It is not my task to disabuse your mind in that particular. But I am sure that she does not desire you to know of her whereabouts, at least for the present—supposing the lady I have spotted in disguise is indeed Julia Diering. Now, if you come forward, the chances are that she would give you another slip. My plan is for you to remain perfectly shady, while I find out what she is up to. If I discover that it would be wise for you to come forward, I will at once apprise you. Perhaps when she decides that, in the role I suspect she is acting, she has escaped those who are, as you know, her deadly enemies—though you say you do not know who they are—"

"No; if I did, I would deal with them summarily myself, whether she ordered it or not."

At this juncture there was a knock at the door.

One of the waiters, obeying the response to enter, presented a letter.

"Dey's been a lettah, sah, down at de offis sence de ebenin' mail, an' de clerk dah forgot to gib hit to you when you kem in."

"Thank you," and tipping the waiter, Magic proceeded to examine the contents immediately, for he recognized on the envelope the well-known chirography of his chief in Baltimore.

"You will please excuse my reading this," he said, apologetically. "It is from head quarters, and probably of pressing importance."

There was a letter and a printed inclosure—the latter a clipping from a newspaper.

The letter as follows:

"What are you up to over there? Read the inclosed. Take the hint, and have a sharp eye for the reward mentioned. You may strike the game in your vicinity."

(Signed by Magic's chief.)

The clipping was from a New Orleans paper, as follows:

"A STRANGE STORY.

"CAREER OF A REMARKABLE WOMAN.

"STARTLING SEQUEL TO A MYSTERY.

"Readers of this paper will easily recall the exciting tragedy developed in a gambling resort in this city, on Custom House street, at a time about one year ago, a brief resume of which we give below.

"The establishment was fathered by a wealthy South American, though practically presided over by one of the most beautiful women imaginable, who was known to the regular frequenters of the parlors as Borgia, the Faro Queen. Night after night she could be seen filling the post at the dealer's chair, and manipulating the fatal box with a marvelous skill and grace. The South American, like her very shadow, was ever present. One night there was a thrilling scene in the parlors. Some poor soul, a slave to the game, had lost every dollar he possessed in the world, and in his frenzy drew a revolver to end his blighted career then and there. Another player, mistaking the motion for a menace, also drew, firing simultaneously and anticipating the would-be suicide by killing him instantly. The unlucky victim had friends present, and these at once attacked the man who had fired the shot. He too had friends. For a space the sound of briskly crackling revolvers filled the spacious *salon*. The place, so luxurious a few moments before, was transformed into a wreck of massy mirrors, disordered furniture and wounded, cursing men. Out of all the shots fired, strangely, only two had taken any serious effect on the combatants; the young man first mentioned and the South American, the latter being overtaken, it was supposed, by a bullet as he was

endeavoring to escape from the *melee*. The murderer of the young man was apprehended, tried and punished, barely escaping with life. The Brazilian had a bullet in his head; his wound was thought to have been inflicted by a stray ball, as he did not take the least part in the trouble. He lived, but his reason seemed to be gone forever. He was placed in an asylum, and after these many months it was believed that he had died, as nothing more was heard of him. The establishment on Custom House street was immediately closed, and Borgia, the Faro Queen, disappeared entirely.

"THE SEQUEL!

"The Spanish Brazilian, Senor Ludoviq, did not die. To the contrary, he recovered fully in health and reason and with a keen remembrance of the events of that exciting night. He has placed a case in the hands of the police. He tells a singular story. He first met Borgia, as she was called, in London, where she filled a position at a gambling *salon* similar to the one on Custom House street. She was then merely an employee. Her beauty was an attraction for the place even as great as the fascination for the game among its votaries. He fell in love with and formally married her, and they came to America to establish business for themselves. His immense wealth was the foundation of an additionally large fortune which they accumulated together. They did not deposit in any bank. As rapidly as money grew in their hands, it was invested in rare diamonds and these deposited with a trust company. When he issued at last from the asylum, Senor Ludoviq found that Borgia had drawn the whole of the immense treasure from the company and fled for parts unknown, without even waiting to ascertain whether her lawful husband was dead or alive. He now directly charges that it was she who shot him down; he saw her in the act as he made toward a door of exit. She wished to be rid of him, and imagined that in the prevailing confusion at the time her deed would never be suspected. The senor had been left a comparatively poor man, considering his former enormous wealth, but is still able to, and does, offer a large reward for the discovery of the woman or the diamonds. It has been ascertained that Borgia went northward at the time of the tragedy. More than one private detective firm has entered for the race—the reward being so large—and there may yet be some exciting developments in addition to those already public in connection with the affair."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE COUNTESS WOULD NOT OBJECT.

MARK MAGIC refolded the letter and the clipping, returning them to their envelope and placing the latter in his pocket.

"Nothing, I hope, that will call you away from this task I have engaged you upon," remarked Hammond.

"Oh, no," the detective replied, a little absently, for his mind was full of strange thoughts in connection with what he had just perused.

"You were about to say something in regard to this person whom you have spotted and whom you suspect to be Julia, doing something when she feels assured that she has eluded her enemies?"

"I think, when she ascertains that fact, she will contrive to let you know where she can be found. Perhaps she has an idea that you might be traced—her enemies probably knowing you as her lover, though you do not know them, and falling upon your track, be led up to finding her. I prefer to handle the case absolutely without any consequent failure, as I shall be able to do if you obey me in my request. Julia Diering is in disguise, if it is Julia Diering; she is not so doing without some deep object. Anything precipitate might frighten her off somewhere where she would elude us completely."

"I will do as you say. What shall it be?"

"In the first place, promise me that you will not, by any means whatever, strive to ascertain anything regarding my comings or goings or follow me if you see me perform a singular act. For I may at a second's notice change my appearance and leave you abruptly at some time when we are together. Of course I could very easily get rid of you altogether; but I have no wish to do that, since you are employing me and it is natural for you to wish to see me occasionally. And now to change the subject: Have you procured your room here?"

"Yes."

"Let me bid you good-night then, for I am a little sleepy."

Hammond withdrew and the detective immediately sunk into a deep study that lasted during nearly a half-hour.

Silent and motionless he sat, having drawn and lighted a cigar, notwithstanding his protest to Hammond that he was sleepy.

In the rings that he sent curling upward to the ceiling he seemed to be shaping a solution of the puzzles that evidently occupied his mind.

When at last he tossed away the cigar and sought his bed, he muttered, in a sudden resolution:

"I'll play the game for its worth, anyhow. I may strike it big, and if I don't, I will at least have the satisfaction that I started on a better clew than those Southern detectives could possibly have caught onto. If the woman is Julia Diering, and if she should prove to be this remarkable woman called Borgia, I have no child's play ahead, by what that clipping suggests."

Magic had been reviewing everything in connection with the mysterious female in black; her attempt at suicide on the boat, the story she had told him in all the appearance of confi-

dence, and apprehension of her enemies, which would throw an additional mystery into the persistent trailing of the two men, Harper and Forceps, if but a fabrication; the information about the diamonds which he had gleamed from Mrs. Duffy and the unusual mode being adopted by the beautiful Countess de Puillier for the inauguration of her bachelors' hotel.

In the morning he was astir at an early hour, and his first act after a good breakfast, was to procure the *Ledger*.

As he anticipated, he soon found, in its classified column, the advertisement of the countess:

"THE BACHELORS.' A private hotel for gentlemen, conducted with exclusiveness and taste. Rooms only. Fine garden, magnificent apartments, polite attention, every convenience for comfort in detail, parlor entertainment. For terms or other information, address or call upon Countess de Puillier, No. — Chestnut street."

It was truly an advertisement to attract attention at least.

Magic set about playing his part at the afore-said hotel.

He purchased a trunk, which he filled with a reasonable but valueless weight, and ordered it delivered to the mansion No. — Chestnut street.

At a later hour he repaired thither himself.

He was admitted by the waiter who had informed him that there was no change for the julep.

Ascending to his room, he could not avoid noticing, as he went, that the countess was determined to make the place attractive in every particular that could be thought of.

The atmosphere was quiet and redolent with an air that was almost like some cool perfume.

But he saw no one other than the sable attendant at the door.

His window overlooked the garden, which, while suggesting to his mind on the night previous a shady and delicious resort for a tired bachelor with his book, now seemed to be in a billow of bloom and sweet scents, where the fountain played and sparkled in a silver spray in the sunlight.

A figure was moving along one of the narrow paths, attired in raiment like some mysterious weaving of charl that showed the figure to exquisiteness while it amply protected.

The countess.

From his accidental point of observation, he watched her, striving to decide in mind whether it possibly could be the girl, Julia Diering, or whether he was wasting all his time following what was so far no more than a mere shadowy impulse that seemed to lead him involuntarily.

As he gazed, he saw the African approach with a card on a salver.

A visitor, evidently, for she immediately turned and entered the house.

Hardly had she and the African disappeared, and as the detective was on the point of leaving the window, when he perceived a face thrusting itself forward cautiously from behind a clump of sweet-scented shrubbery.

The face of Harper.

And a moment later, the face of Forceps close beside.

The quite unexpected occurrence caused just the slightest thrill to pass over his pulse.

If these two were there in such a stealthy manner, it must be with a view to something concerning the countess, and the fact would seem to suggest that she was, at last, Julia Diering.

Drawing back slightly in order to be better screened from the two whose eyes were making a critical survey of the house, Magic kept his keen glance upon the skulking figures, who now, withdrawing their faces, he could see, were making for another part of the garden on the nearer side of the fountain.

As the minutes passed, he heard footsteps in the hallway.

Another lodger had been secured by the countess, no doubt.

Then, after a few more minutes, she appeared again in the garden, going toward an arbor.

She had reached a point just before the arbor, and where the intervening foliage shut her from the view of any person at the house unless happening to occupy an elevated position such as Magic did, when a rather startling scene transpired.

Up from the denseness of the rose bushes, one on each side, rose the forms of Harper and Forceps.

They obstructed her advance and retreat simultaneously.

But the countess sprang slightly backward, facing them haughtily.

What was said Magic could not overhear at that distance.

But he saw a leer of triumph on the face of Harper.

Then, after a few hasty words, the fellow started forward with hands outstretched, as if to grasp her violently.

But he was checked.

Without flinching in the least from his advance, Madame Constance produced a revolver with almost lightning quickness, and its barrel flashed in the sunlight as it covered the broad breast of the ruffian.

The movement had thrown both Forceps and

Harper in her front too, so that she really at the moment held the advantage.

With her left hand she pointed commandingly toward the postern, and evidently was bidding them begone under the threat of opening fire from her small and highly gleaming weapon.

In the following moment the detective exclaimed to himself, in an involuntary admiration:

"Good for the countess!"

For the evil pair slunk away from before her and vanished out at the gate.

Then she placed a whistle to her lips, blowing a single blast that brought the African to her side.

Exchanging a few words with him, he hastened to make secure the gate which had been left unfastened by some inadvertence.

Madame Constance could have summoned aid with her whistle; but she had pluckily attended to the interlopers herself, and this showed that she felt entire capability in taking care of herself in an emergency requiring nerve.

Magic passed out from his room and downstairs.

The countess seemed to have had enough of the garden for the present, however, for she was just approaching along the grand main hall as he reached the last step.

"Ah, Mr. Gorsuch, you have arrived, then?"

"Yes, madame, I have been in my room for a short time, admiring your beautiful garden."

"Ah, did you observe any one there?" quickly.

"Yourself, I believe."

"Yes, I was intending to stroll there for awhile, but I fear it is rather too warm. By the by, I have made some addition to my household, even as early as this. Will you look at my register?"

"With pleasure. I am glad you have opened so auspiciously."

She led the way into the side room and pointed to the ledger on the desk.

"Three to commence with," she said, smiling.

"It is not so very bad, do you think so?"

"Rather good, I should say. At the same rate, you will soon fill your admirable little hotel."

He had read the names of three arrivals, of whom the countess hastened to say:

"Gentlemen of highest credentials in business, Mr. Gorsuch. They are all, every one, I understand, brokers. Their offices are near the Exchange, they said."

"And that reminds me, madame, that I have not yet shown you my own references," producing several official-looking documents from his breast-pocket.

"Please examine them at your leisure, and return. You are at liberty to address the parties subscribing to those letters."

Magic had hurriedly prepared several letters of general introduction ostensibly from merchants in Atlanta.

The names he used were names of persons with whom he was well acquainted in his professional capacity; and he had, before going to "The Bachelors," written himself to them, advising them of his action and at the same time explaining fully his motive without disclosing its detail.

He knew that if the countess wrote, the Atlanta parties would not betray the deception.

Receiving the letters, Madame Constance said:

"I will not keep them for a long while. By the by, Mr. Gorsuch, can you recommend a near place where my guests may dine? I anticipate that I may be asked by some who may come to my house."

"Perhaps the Colonnade."

"Where is that?"

"A very short distance below your hotel, madame, and I believe a very admirable establishment. But, I think you will find that your guests will rather take their meals down town, nearer their places of business, or perhaps at the club. Bachelor merchants, almost as a rule, belong to some club, where excellent meals are served to the members."

"Ah, those clubs!" exclaimed the countess, deprecatingly. "Why will gentlemen seek them, when they can find the same enjoyments at their residence?"

"The attraction may be the card-table, to a degree."

"And have I not told you that I shall make provision for that amusement here, if my guests desire?"

"But there is a different kind of card-playing, madame, which perhaps you would not permit."

"What is that?"

"It is called Faro."

She looked keenly into his Southern face for perhaps a second; then, as if assured, and smiling sweetly, she said:

"Why should I object to anything that is quiet and which may not be too public to injure my house?"

"You would not object?"

"Not if the players were gentlemen who could control themselves in their moments of disappointment and who would guard the secret well," she said, casting a glance warily toward the door.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A NEW TRAILER WITH A NEW THEORY.

"I HAVE seen a little of that game," the beautiful woman pursued, in a delightfully confidential way. "My husband, the count, was a votary, and I frequently accompanied him in the earlier days of our marriage to see the excitement of exclusive places where he visited, and where ladies might be admitted. It was when it was too late, that I realized I had so injudiciously given my countenance to his extravagance. At his death, as I have told you, I was nearly ruined; my fortune had been quite lost by him in that way. Do you know, the thought has sometimes entered my mind that it would be a good way to strike back at fate, for me to seek to recover my fortune from the same channel in which it was lost."

"You mean by trying your luck at the table?"

"Oh, no. I mean by myself assuming the part that was assumed by those who were the hungry things to drag from my husband's pockets all that he could master for wagers."

"You mean, madame, to conduct a table yourself?"

"I have said that this was only a thought of mine."

"Oh, you may speak quite freely with me, madame. I am somewhat of a lover of the exciting game myself. I would be glad to patronize liberally a table with so charming a lady as yourself at the dealer's box."

"Would you?"

"Assuredly."

The countess seemed thoughtful for a moment.

"It may be," she said, slowly, "that I shall think more seriously of the matter then."

"But of course you have had no experience at such a business?"

"Oh, no! But then I have seen it so much and so often that I am sure I could successfully attempt it."

"If you decide during my sojourn in this city, please do not hesitate to let me know. I shall wish for you every success."

"Thank you."

Magic bowed and withdrew as the bell sounded, telling that there was another visitor for "The Bachelors."

Half an hour later, Madame de Puillier had scored another arrival.

Magic went from the house and strolled around toward the rear of the premises.

The magnificent garden backed upon a court where were houses occupied by a humble class of people, and he had no difficulty in locating the gate through which the two skulkers, Harper and Forceps, had gained admittance.

He had observed that the men were no longer attired in their very genteel clothes; their appearance when he saw them in the garden, was that of persons scarcely above the average condition of the ordinary tramp.

They had been possibly lucky in striking the trail of the mysteriously missing woman, if the countess could be that woman; and Magic felt partly sure that they knew what they were about—their brief dialogue in the garden with the lady was to the effect that they saw through her disguise and really meditated some violence at the moment when she so spiritedly held them at the muzzle of her ready revolver.

But in Magic's mind there was now a paramount thought more than even this.

The readiness with which the countess had seemed to enter into the suggestion of having a faro table in her house brought a thrill of suspicion into his mind that perhaps she was more familiar with such a game than she was willing to admit; perhaps she knew it thoroughly; perhaps she had manipulated the dealer's box before.

Perhaps the woman was the mysterious Borgia, the Faro Queen, spoken of in the advertising account from the New Orleans papers sent him by his chief!

As he was sauntering away from the entrance to the alley-like court, he suddenly saw both Harper and Forceps emerge from a two-story dwelling on the side opposite to the wall, in conversation with the evident tenant of the house.

Without betraying that he had noticed them, he slackened his walk to see which way they would turn.

Then he followed the pair at a safe distance. They made straight for the Colonnade.

Here they registered and were shown up to a room.

Magic himself registered for meals and paid for a week's board in advance.

"They are keeping close to the woman," he thought, as he seated himself in the side room and began to glance over a paper.

He had been but a few moments thus occupied, when into the room came Harper and Forceps.

They took chairs only a few feet from the disguised detective and proceeded to converse in a low tone.

But Magic's ears were uncommon ears, and unknown to them, he caught much of what was said, though apparently engrossed in his paper, which he held high before his face.

"She's started a new lay!" exclaimed Harper, whisperingly.

"Yes, rather, I must say. She doesn't scare at all like she has all along and did a few days ago. We must work our game a little differently, and more rapidly, I may say, for we are pretty well down at the heel now. Our money is gone; we have no time to lose."

Harper glanced downward at his attire rather dolefully.

"My only good suit, my watch, and the same with you, Forceps, everything spouted, and Sandy mad because he thinks we 'played' him. Suppose we don't make the racket at all? What are we to do without money? And our funds are too short to risk a buck against the tiger."

"Right you are. What we have, let's hold on to it. I will try and devise a means for bringing matters to a climax with the girl, or do a little something in my old line, for that matter, to keep us afloat. There ought to be good picking in that house, don't you think so?"

"Yes. But of course there can be no doubt about the girl being the one we are after?"

"Why, not in the least. She can't fool me with that wig of hair and a little other make up."

"You think it is a wig?"

"Certain. She's had her hair shaved off, and the blonde tresses are false to a hair."

"Where has she gotten all this money so suddenly? For she couldn't make any such splurge without a pile, I know."

"My theory is that she has communicated quickly with the person who has had the diamonds in trust all along. She has realized on them in a hurry. You and I both know that she has proved herself a remarkable girl in the way of doing things with lightning quickness, as witness the closing of her establishment in Washington and skipping out, and the manner of getting rid of her child and the nurse so adroitly that we had no suspicion of her movements until they were all gone—"

"Look here!" Harper suddenly broke in, and in a little louder tone of voice as something startling seemed to strike him.

"Well, what's the matter?"

"Suppose she has realized on the diamonds, the whole lot?"

"Well?"

"Maybe she's got everything invested by this time in that big house; bought it and piled up the luxuries until there's scarcely a thousand left!"

"In that case," declared Forceps, coolly, "I should be so angry with the sly girl that I would set fire to the durned place and burn up what she had deprived us of by her cursed ingenuity."

"You mean it?"

"Dead sure," with a serious nod.

"By gosh! so would I!"

"We mustn't anticipate that just yet. Wait till we get our room around on that court this afternoon. We can spy over the garden wall to our heart's content; at the proper time, I can go through the premises for what it's worth and raise enough, I guess, to keep us going for awhile. I know of plenty of 'fences' in this burgh that will crack up for the equivalent."

And Forceps added, rising:

"Oh, you'll find I haven't forgotten any of my old time expertness with the tools, and we can hire a set for a night, for that matter."

"Where will you get them?"

"Why, at the saloon of Paddy Distance, on South street."

"Where we put up at first?"

"Just there, you bet. Come, let's walk. I can't stand so much confinement, never could after that long term in the cell."

The pair left the reading-room.

Magic glanced slyly after their receding forms over the top of his newspaper.

"So our Forceps is a cracksman, eh?" he cogitated. "And they will break into madame's house and dispose of the proceeds of a midnight raid at the 'plenty of fences' with which the city abounds. A nice little plot."

Then he fell to thinking over the conversation as it related to the possible identity of the beautiful countess.

The men seemed to be confident beyond question that she could be no other than the missing girl Julia Diering.

They had rented a room on the court at the rear of "The Bachelors" whence to conduct their burglarious and designing purposes against Madame Constance.

After a dinner at the hotel, the detective returned to the room he had taken at the private hotel of the countess.

This room was on the second floor at the rear overlooking the garden—a corner room, with a similar room beneath, having but the one window, though large and airy the finely paned sash.

As he drew near to the window, he overheard voices ascending from the window underneath.

There was nothing special in this mere fact, but at the instant he caught a few words that attracted him.

Perhaps two of the newly arrived guests of

the house were conducting the dialogue; the voice of one was saying:

"You may return to the chief and say to him that I am very sure I am on the trail of one who was concerned in the robbery of the diamonds, if not in the actual and mysterious murder. Of course this woman, whoever she may be—and I do not believe she is any countess any more than you are—could not have made away with the body of the girl; but she is an accomplice, according to my suspicion. I came across the diamonds—or what I suppose may be a portion of the diamonds—at the store of Dash and Blank on South Eighth street this morning. This woman was there and disposed of a lot of them, taking them, so said the jeweler, from a velvet-pocketed little belt, such as I obtained a description of from the lady keeping the millinery establishment. This change in her appearance is all a sham—artificial."

"And when shall I say, sergeant, that a report may be expected from you?" inquired the other voice.

"That is a difficult thing to say. I shall keep pretty close to the house; I don't want you to come here again. I am playing the part of a very wealthy individual who has nothing to do but to enjoy quietness and luxury. I shall not go out much, if at all. My eyes will be continually on this countess, as she calls herself, and I may tumble to her partner in the affair—that is, the man who evidently must have performed the muscular part of the murder. As soon as I have anything to report, I shall find the means to send it in. See to it that no one from head quarters attempts to visit me here. She is a shrewd woman, no doubt, and would take to flight if she suspected that I was tracking her."

The sound of conversation receded from the window and Magic heard no more.

Here was another and singular suggestion for him to ponder upon in his own theoretical trail.

The countess had disposed of diamonds from a little velvet belt that agreed, in description, with the belt that was taken from the bedroom of the supposed murdered girl, and which description had been furnished by Mrs. Duffy.

The alert sergeant had struck a clew in finding that this Countess de Puillier had sold some of the diamonds—or the supposed diamonds—from a belt exactly like the missing belt.

He was then playing the part of a wealthy guest at "The Bachelors," while in reality watching for an additional clew from the movements of the countess, which might throw him onto the track of her accomplice in the tragedy, the man who had killed and made off with the murdered girl.

A new phase, indeed.

Madame Constance suspected of being concerned in the murder of Julia Diering!

And Magic was piping the case from the standpoint that she was Julia Diering herself and also, possibly, the bold adventuress known in the past as Borgia, the Faro Queen!

He too resolved that he would confine himself as much as possible to the house, in order that the madame should not make a move to escape his observation, and in order, too, that this aspiring sergeant—evidently a shrewd fellow—should not get ahead of him in the matter of points.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE COUNTESS UNMASKS.

NIGHT came and found the magnificent hotel residence again blazing at the front, while its grandly suggestive appearance of interior luxury seemed to have been enhanced in some magically susceptible yet indescribable way.

The dulcet music from the piano came floating forth upon the street, filling the air with notes that showed the performer to be either one accustomed to this style of "hired" evening concert, and aware of the manner of applying herself attractively to the task, or she was one whose very artlessness of touch aroused instant attention.

Even in that short time "The Bachelors" was being discussed by the frequenters of the Exchange, at their usual resorts down-town, or among those who had so quickly availed of what they considered a remarkable and at the same time delicious innovation.

The reading and little card-room, set aside by madame, contained several gentlemen, at an early hour of the evening, whose conversation was principally upon the enterprise of the beautiful countess.

She herself was a delightful attraction; for her parlors—where she expected to be nightly, as if in continual reception—were open to the guests when they should tire of the monotony of smoking, and the strains from the piano were something new for a hotel devoted exclusively to bachelors.

"By Jove! you know," exclaimed a young broker, who puffed meditatively in the room with his partner. "This is a little ahead, eh? Never saw it exactly in this style before. Wonder if she will prove herself able to keep a hotel, as they say?"

"I am taking in all of this kind of luxury all

the time," his partner said. "I do not grudge the twelve dollars per week for such surroundings."

"Nor I. But suppose we take a look in upon this young lady who is to entertain the guests nightly with piano music, as the countess has promised."

"I hope she is pretty. Music by a pretty performer is always best, to my mind and eye."

"Look out, there! No flirtation, you know. That is forbidden."

"Oh, I shall not lose this delightful house of privileges by infringing the rules, depend."

They started toward the parlors after throwing away their fragrant cigars.

There had occurred a lull in the music as they spoke together.

Mark Magic had descended, and was seated by one of the long windows opening out upon the veranda-like porch.

He was listening to the piano and had cast several covert glances toward the performer, observing that she was very comely and was an expert at the keys.

His thoughts, however, turned driftingly upon his puzzling case all the time, and he was almost unaware of the fact when the sound of music seemed to melt entirely away, and silence reigned as if the performer, momentarily tired, had paused for a brief rest at her labor.

Suddenly the detective felt the light touch of a hand on his shoulder, and a low, musical voice said:

"Sir, may I speak with you?"

He looked up surprisedly, to see the young lady standing beside his chair.

"Why, certainly, miss. But—but do you not know that the guests are forbidden to hold any conversation with you?"

"Yes, I know that. But, at the risk of losing my position here, I have ventured to address you, for there is something on my mind that worries me."

"Can I be of service to you? You need not hesitate. I shall be glad to do anything that I can. But you must be careful that the countess does not catch us at this."

"You look to me, sir, like one who is indeed a gentleman; I have learned that you, madame's first lodger, are a Southerner, and I know the Southerners are full of chivalry. I have therefore determined to speak with you concerning myself."

Magic bowed, saying:

"I shall try and prove your opinion of me, miss, a correct one in every particular."

"Tell me, then, do you think I do right in remaining here in the capacity in which you see me employed?"

He looked inquiringly at her, as if he desired her to be more explicit, or explain the meaning of her inquiry.

"I have been engaged by madame to perform here upon the piano every other night at a fair salary. I have an aged mother to support, and availed of the opportunity madame's advertisement seemed to offer for that reason. I am a very poor girl; these clothes I wear are supplied me by the countess. It was with some hesitancy I took the position when madame explained briefly to me what manner of house she purposed keeping. Since then I have been very uneasy for myself, and I seek your advice."

"In what way, miss?"

"Is it right for a young girl like I am to occupy the position I do here, where there are only men, and probably will be so many of them? Will my reputation suffer from the publicity I am giving myself?" and lowering her musical voice, she asked, with something like a breathlessness: "Tell me, on your honor, is it an entirely proper house for me to be in?"

She seemed to almost hold her breath as she awaited his answer, fixing upon him a pair of eyes that really had in them something of an inward startlement.

"Miss," he said, assuringly, "I have every reason to believe that you are quite safe here under the rule established by your employer, the countess, that no one shall address you in any way under pain of being expelled as a guest. I know of no reason why you should not continue to perform your commendable services at the piano for an honorable salary, the earning of which is for the object you have named. If at any time you may have reason to believe that you have gotten beyond the protecting rules of the house through an ungentlemanly inadvertence of any one of the guests, call promptly upon me, and I will prove your first opinion of me with pleasure. Though I must say for your interests, and for myself, since I do not wish to be compelled to leave this delightful abode, that we had best not again address each other, excepting in the emergency at which I have hinted."

"Thank you."

He bowed again as the young girl turned away and resumed her place at the piano.

It was at this juncture that the two young brokers entered.

Close behind them, as if just coming from a brief turn in the garden, madam, the countess, appeared, leaning upon the arm of a gentleman

who appeared to be of decidedly Russian descent.

Very erect and of splendid physique was he, with large, bushy beard and high forehead.

The countess released herself, saying:

"And now, if you please, Mr. Eimenoff, excuse me while I address myself to the comfort of other guests."

"Of course, madame," and Magic, as he heard the voice of the man, instantly knew that this was the one who had been in conversation with another at the lower window, during the afternoon, and who had been addressed as "sergeant."

The masquerading detective sergeant whom we have seen in his own proper person at the scene of the tragedy at Mrs. Duffy's millinery shop.

Magic now knew the man who was on the trail of the lovely countess, under the impression that she was directly implicated in the mysterious murder and disappearance of Mrs. Duffy's strangely beautiful clerk.

Madame Constance, after a bow to the seated Southerner, passed to the two young brokers, with whom she engaged in a pleasant conversation at once.

And the piano music floated dreamily around the few assembled there, and the fountain in the garden pashed on in its silvery falling way, and just a single stray gleam of moonlight came through the draperies of the long window at which sat the alert detective, contributing, as it were, a poetry to the scene and senses.

Presently he was aroused by the voice of madame at his elbow.

"I would like to say something to you in private, Mr. Gorsuch," were her low words.

Magic started slightly.

Could she have learned of his brief conversation with the young girl at the piano? It was not unlikely, as he had observed that madame had her arrangements so perfected that the ushers, and particularly the sable attendant who answered to two touches of the bell, were constantly moving in such a manner as to give them eyes for everything in the direction of the parlors.

As he arose and followed her he was thinking for some excuse for what had transpired, which he could make without betraying the suspicions which the girl had expressed.

Madame led the way to the third floor almost without a word.

Here, too, there was an attendant, so that they were really not alone for a single moment.

But they soon were to be.

Madame stepped to a door and opened it with a key which she carried.

Beckoning to him, she entered and closed the door.

And Magic was hugely surprised, half-prepared though he was, to find himself facing a brand-new and elaborate faro-table!

It was a complete home for the tiger.

A glistening sideboard was convenient, on which were arrayed decanters innumerable and glasses of various shapes appropriate to the draught to be selected.

"You see, Mr. Gorsuch," she said, with her most bewitching manner, "I have been expeditious since our conversation. I have decided that the gaming-table shall yield back to me that which I lost through the extravagance of my husband, the count."

"You have been expeditious, indeed," he said.

But Magic was not to be deceived.

He knew well, by the completeness of everything in the luxurious chamber, that it had been all arranged prior to the conversation between himself and madame on the subject.

"If you can suggest that anything is wanting," she said, with affected artlessness, "I shall at once supply it."

"I can think of only one thing."

"What is that?"

"The players."

She laughed in a prolonged ripple.

"Very humorous of you, indeed, Mr. Gorsuch. But do you not think they will come of themselves when once it is known that this table is here?"

"Oh, no doubt. But you must not be too ready to trust all who are your guests."

"Nor am I. I have already sounded the gentleman you saw me with, and find that he is a lover of the game."

"No doubt you found it easy to sound him," Magic thought, to himself, though he did not speak, "when he is just aching to have you make every possible advance of that kind."

"I shall have him here in a few minutes—I have designated the number. We can at least try our new table, though there may be only you two—just for amusement, you know."

"I never play that game for amusement, madame," said Magic.

She laughed again at this.

And while the ripple was upon her lips, there came a tap at the door.

"It is Mr. Eimenoff."

And he it was.

But he was not alone.

Accompanying him was a young broker—one of the very two who had been inspecting the

parlors and the piano performer a few minutes previous.

"Ah, you have come to venture, also," greeted she, to the unexpected addition to the party.

"Yes, madame. If there is anything to be won or lost here, I am ready to try my luck. I half-thought there was something of this kind in the wind from my first coming here. I am sorry my partner has just gone out, or he too would have joined in to fill up the game."

"Shall I take my seat?"

"If you will please," said the Russian-looking Mr. Eimenoff.

Gracefully she glided behind the table and seated herself on a slightly raised chair, before which was placed the significant metal box, though in this instance evidently a box of highly polished silver.

Cards, colored chips, in fact the whole paraphernalia seemed suddenly and gracefully to leap into existence under the rapid motion of the countess's hands, and she presently faced them, saying:

"Please name the amount of your purchases, gentlemen. White fives, blue tens, red twenties."

Then there was a rattle of silver, a rustle of crisp paper, and the click! click! of stacking checks.

CHAPTER XX.

MARK MAGIC INTERVIEWS A BURGLAR.

THE brilliancy of "The Bachelors'" gradually dimmed as the thoroughly-instructed servants, with the advance of the night-hour, turned off one after another of the bright burners within, until only an occasional jet was remaining to light the halls.

The tall, muscular and very black African whom we have noticed before, appeared to be a sort of major-domo, for he moved hither and thither, looking to the fastenings of the front and rear after the departure of the young lady at the piano, for whom a hack called at the hour of eleven.

The massive front doors were closed, and the building assumed an air of desertion throughout.

It was nearly three o'clock A. M. when the door of the mystic chamber in the upper story opened and forth came the recent players at the table of the green baize.

Mr. Eimenoff was as tall and stately as ever.

Mark Magic, though he had borne the loss of a hundred dollars or so, did not seem to be in the least put out about it.

The young broker was quite pale and around the corners of his mouth there were lines that had not been noticeable there before he entered to chance his luck against the beautiful countess who dealt the cards with a wondrously-practiced hand.

He had lost heavily.

"You are a rather extravagant player, I fear," remarked the countess to him, as they moved off from the vicinity of the apartment which had proven so unlucky for him.

"I can bear my losses, countess," he replied, with an evident effort at calmness.

"I trust that you will exercise due discretion, gentlemen."

"Depend upon us," responded Eimenoff and the Southerner.

The young broker sought his room—one taken jointly with his partner—and found his friend and associate there already in bed.

But he was not asleep, and on the other's entrance turned over and gazed at him a little surprisedly, asking:

"Where in the world have you been, anyhow?"

"Fighting the fates."

"Faro?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"You will be a little surprised when I tell you."

"Well?"

"The countess is a lovely and terrible woman."

"What do you mean?"

"You will probably find out if you take a notion to go into room 20 after ten o'clock in the evening."

"What's it all about?"

"She is a veritable queen of faro."

"No!"

"True as you live. She has one of the best furnished rooms for that little amusement that I was ever inside of. It has cost me something to become aware of this fact."

"How much?" questioned his partner, seriously.

"Something like six thousand dollars."

A prolonged whistle came from the individual in the bed.

While he said:

"I shall try my luck with her then to-morrow night—or to-night, rather, for it is now morning by several hours."

"I have had some consolation amid my losses, though," the other said, as he slowly paced back and forth in a meditative and excited humor.

"What is that?"

"The countess has arranged to go driving

with me at Fairmount in the coming afternoon."

"Why do you call that a consolation?"

"Because"—pausing before his companion with suddenness and vehemence—"I believe I am bewitched. I am desperately in love with this woman who has seemed to give me an ecstatic pleasure even while I saw my money going, going, going into her keeping. An angel, beautiful and terrible. And I am in a passion over her that seems to whirl my head around dizzily."

"A goner!" commented his partner, turning over in a sort of disgust at the avowal.

While this conversation progressed between the two, an item of some importance was transpiring with the others to that first night of the opening of the mystic room.

Eimenoff had turned aside to enter his room, and the Southerner had almost reached his own door when a low call from the countess arrested him.

Turning, he perceived that she had been joined by her ever attentive sable attendant.

They were speaking together earnestly and lowly.

"Mr. Gorsuch," she said, detainingly.

He retraced his steps to her side.

"I shall ask your advice in regard to a rather thrilling matter that has just arisen."

"I shall be happy to give it if it can be of service."

"My servant here informs me that he has been listening to a suspicious sound at one of the windows in the areaway from the kitchen for nearly a half-hour. It is as if some one was trying to force an entrance. But if such is the case, I suppose the unusually heavy shutters have given the would-be burglar more trouble than he counted on, for he has not yet succeeded in opening them. What shall I do? I do not desire to have the police about my premises at so early a day as this."

She looked really helplessly at him as she spoke.

"Your servant might have gone out and around and probably frightened them off," he suggested.

But the African shook his head.

"Dey's pow'ful crazy, dem bu'glers is, an' I doesn't want fo' to get shot. 'Sides, I was ordered to repo't to de mist'iss ef any'ting wa'n't all right fus'."

"Please leave the matter to me," Magic said, instantly realizing that the bold fellows Harper and Forceps had thus early begun to operate for the repletion of their exchequer.

Forceps at least, he felt sure, it must be.

"What will you do?" she asked.

"That is a question that a man can hardly answer before he encounters the burglar. Action may to a degree depend on circumstances—"

"You mean to encounter him?"

"Certainly, if you will permit. Somebody must do so; I think I am equal to the case. If you will please retire, so as to be removed from any unpleasant scene which may transpire," to the countess, "and if you will place yourself where you can be of assistance to me should I require it," to the African, "I shall see what the burglar wants, and if I can accommodate him I will do so—for I think I know what he wants; a good strong pair of handcuffs!"

The easy coolness of the Southerner inspired confidence in the half coward African. He expressed himself willing and ready for the programme if the gentleman would operate in the way proposed.

The countess said:

"I shall trust entirely to you, Mr. Gorsuch," and withdrew to her private rooms.

"Now, then, show me the way to the kitchen where you heard the sounds. Remove your boots—as I am doing," setting the example as he spoke.

On tip-toe, and with the African leading the way, they descended to the rear basement, the windows of which opened on an areaway screened from promenaders in the garden by a growth of luxuriant honeysuckle.

There was a sufficient glimmer of light from the gas-jet at the head of the stairs leading to the basement to afford them a view of their course.

"Remain here," said Magic, to the African, as they came to the stairs. "If I want you I will call you. Do not come down unless I do call you. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sah."

Magic stepped into the spacious kitchen.

Treading lightly, he advanced toward one of the heavily shuttered windows.

By merest chance it was the exact window at which the African had detected the suspicious sound.

And if the detective's action could have been witnessed by madame or the sable attendant, they would have been hugely astonished.

He deliberately proceeded to draw the bolt from its socket, as if to facilitate the entrance of the burglar, whose fumbling and wary boring with some tool on the other side was distinctly audible.

It was an hour when the household would

naturally be supposed to be wrapt in most profound slumber.

But there was one there in that semi-dark kitchen whose business for years had been the handling of just such parties as the one who might now enter without half the trouble he was putting himself to if he did but discover that the shutter was not fastened at all.

Suddenly this fact seemed to be discovered by the burglar.

A set of fingers appeared around the edge of the moulding.

The shutter was cautiously pulled wide and a masked face peered in, searching around the interior of the kitchen as if to make sure that the coast was clear.

"Durn it!" mumbled a half-audible voice—the voice of Forceps. "Here I've been working like a horse up a tread-mill to force the blasted things, and they haven't been fastened at all. Now then for the good things of this mysterious house. And I guess Harper an' I'll soon have enough to keep us afloat."

He sprang lightly and noiselessly over the sill, alighting on the floor in a bent attitude and listening before proceeding to advance any further.

Just as he seemed to assure himself that he had accomplished this much without having attracted any attention on the part of the occupants of the house, and as he drew a breath of satisfaction preparatory to beginning his investigations, he was startled in a rather violent manner.

"I think you have gone about far enough, my friend!"

The voice was almost at Forceps's ear.

At the same time a quick hand snatched the mask from his face.

He started to spring backward toward the window.

But a vise-like hand gripped his throat, and he saw a transient gleam before his eyes like the gleam from the barrel of a revolver.

"Keep quiet, my friend. I've got you. If you give me much trouble this weapon which I have half inserted in your ear might take a notion to go off and spatter your brains out."

"Curse it!" burst from the surprised villain.

"Oh, you may curse it as much as you please. But be wise and don't tempt me to shoot, for I do assure you that I shall certainly pull trigger if you make the slightest attempt at resistance. In short, you had better consider it a full surrender," was the detective's cool but determined speech.

"Well, what are you going to do with me?" demanded Forceps, sullenly, as he gradually made out the outline of his captor and plainly saw that any movement on his part might indeed be attended by disastrous consequences to himself.

"I am going to ask you a few questions, first; and if you do not answer them straight, shall hand you over to the police."

"And if I do answer them?"

"Perhaps I shall let you go."

Forceps drew a quick breath as he thus learned that he had a chance to get out of his scrape.

"What is it you want to ask? I don't know anything that you can want to know."

"Oh, yes you do."

"Well, what is it?"

"Tell me the whole secret of your pursuit of the girl known as Julia Diering."

Forceps uttered a low sound that was almost a cry of astonishment; but the gripe of the detective on his throat tightened, checking the sound.

"Speak low," he commanded, for there is another waiting at the head of the stairs to come down here if needed. If your words are heard, they may be mistaken for my voice, and then your chances for liberty will be over. Answer my question if you want to save yourself from being jailed. What is the secret of your pursuit of Julia Diering?"

"Why, who in thunder are you?" demanded Forceps, astonished beyond measure at the question.

"If it will do you any good to know, I will tell you. I am Mark Magic, of Baltimore. Now, go ahead with your little story."

Forceps groaned in his soul as he heard the name of the man who gripped his collar and who held him sternly under the muzzle of that gleaming revolver.

CHAPTER XXI.

MAGIC GATHERS POINTS FOR A NEW BASIS.

"WHY don't you just march me off to jail and stop all this waste of talk?" mumbled Forceps, doggedly. "You can't let me go, now you've caught me entering a house."

"Can't I?"

"No, you can't. You'd be compounding a felony, an' I reckon you're a leetle too smart to do anything like that."

"You are anxious to go to Moyamensing, then?"

"No, I ain't anxious, particularly," grimly answered the burglar, careful to confine his words to a hoarse whisper, under the recent reminder from his captor.

"Then answer my question, and we'll see whether I'll let you go or not, as I said."

"Do you really mean it?"

"I do, and will take the consequences. You see, Forceps—"

"How did you know my name?"

"Oh, I've been on your track ever since you left Baltimore with that pal of yours, called Harper. By the by is he waiting for you outside?"

"No he ain't. I'm all alone."

"So much the better. You can just say to him when you return to him that your little errand here was a failure, that's all."

"You talk as if you had calculated that I was just a-going to up an' tell you everything you want to know."

"I guess you'll tell."

"Do you promise me that if I do tell you what there is in the thing about this gal, you'll let me off scot clean?"

"Yes, provided you give me your solemn assurance that you will drop her trail altogether."

"Won't do it—so there!" exclaimed Forceps, with set teeth. "We've followed her too long an' been at too much expense to drop her now. I don't care to rob anybody like the way you've caught me trying; it was on'y a case of necessity. We're after big ducats, we are."

"I give you just as long as it will take me to count twenty to make up your mind whether you will tell me all or whether you will spend a term in State's prison. I am counting; so be in a hurry with your noddle-box."

The detective spoke lightly enough, but Forceps, an old offender, accustomed to the ways of detectives, fully felt that there was an unmistakable resolution beneath every word his captor uttered.

"Hold on with your count," he said, interceptingly, as Magic proceeded to count in a whisper so close to the other's ear that each number uttered seemed like the knell of doom.

"Well, you've decided to out with it?"

"This is a fair shake?"

"Square and fair!"

"It's pretty hard to give up the wealth we've been expecting to get from the girl."

"You've heard my terms."

Forceps had a bright thought just at the moment. He reasoned that the detective had not required anything in regard to Harper. His partner, then, might continue the effort to wrest from the girl the wealth they were after, without compromising him in future transactions. For he knew that if once he violated a pledge of this character given to a man like Mark Magic, he need hope for no mercy if ever in the future brought face to face with the noted detective in a criminal way.

"You want to know what there is for us in following the trail of the girl?"

"Exactly."

"Do you know who she is, in the first place?"

"Go on," said Magic, in a non-committing manner.

"Well, where she came from nobody knows—leastwise we don't, Harper an' I. We came across her first in Washington. Harper is a professional with the cards, an' he was pretty well fixed at the time. In some way he made the acquaintance of this girl, who was living in a very quiet way on North Ninth street. But bless your soul, she's a rather old girl, after all. Her quiet ways were all a blind. She was just about as cunning a piece as ever you struck in your born days, she was. Harper was very attentive to her—this Miss Beryl Pearl, as she called herself—and began to think he had her dead-gone on him. He'd 'a' married her right off, I reckon, about that time. Well, she let out just what she was, one night, by playing cards with him. She found he was a gambler, an' pretty well known about town, an' then she made the proposition that they open a parlor. See? A tiger-den, you know. Harper was 'in' all the time, an' they soon had one of the cutest little back-rooms, in a theatrical location, that ever you saw. Harper fell more in love than ever then. They began to make more money than they knew what to do with. I was brought in to do a little pigeoning."

"This here thing went on for a while, an' then she brought, all of a sudden like, a little boy child to the city, which she said was hers. The child had a nurse that seemed to me to be something like a cross between a mulatto an' a Indian; a ugly-fugged thing was that nurse. Harper didn't care for this. He was still full of marry. He had discovered, too, that this pretty girl—who'd adopted the name of Julia Diering—had a belt chock-full of diamonds! A small fortune that she kept hid somewhere. Then Harper was more determined to marry than ever. But the cussed fool got on a spree one night an' let out that he wanted the diamonds. Whether it was because he showed his true hand in the little unpleasantness, or whether she'd about concluded that she could get along without him, is something I don't know. At any rate, she gave him the fling."

"Harper, you know, wasn't to be so easily bluffed. He hung around, an' threatened to do some harm to her boy if she didn't give him the diamonds. She was going to have him arrested at first; but he just told her that as sure as she tried that she would have her throat cut by

one of his partners, who was a bloody fellow, for whom the money was ready as soon as he did the job, an' the job was to be done as soon as it was known that he, Harper, had been arrested through her doing. I reckon she was a little scared at that. She didn't stay to do much fighting. She spirited her child away somewhere, an' Harper an' I couldn't never find out where she sent him an' the nurse. We hung around her so that finally she skipped out an' nearly gave us the slip. But we've managed to stick pretty close, in hopes of getting her into our clutches, you know, an' then Harper was to torture her into a confession as to where the boy was, if she wouldn't tell where the diamonds were, and with the boy once in our possession we could easily do with her as we pleased, for she just doted on the child, an' I know would do anything sooner than see any harm come to him. All we wanted was the diamonds, an' I tell you straight we weren't going to hesitate at anything much to get them. Then we'd skip the country. Now you've got it—all of it."

"What is this man, Harper, to her?" asked the detective.

"How do you mean?"

"Isn't he something more to her than a mere acquaintance?"

"Not that I know of."

"Not her husband?"

"What are you talking about! I tell you he wanted to marry her, but that drunken spree of his spoiled his own game."

"This is the whole racket?"

"Everything—honor bright."

"Now, Forceps, I want to give you a little advice."

"What about?"

"Keep clear of the girl in every particular. She's 'wanted.'"

"Wanted?"

"You know what I mean. You've heard that word in your own ears before now when you were wanted. Drop this trail, I warn you, if you don't want to be brought into a prominence that may place you behind the bars where you served once before."

"How do you know I was ever sent up?"

"My frisky friend, I know all about it. And this night's little work is your first return to old habits since you got out; that's the reason I don't want to be too hard on you, you see, with a tinge of humor. And now, one more question. Do you and Harper believe that this woman who calls herself the Countess de Puillier is the girl Julia Diering, or Beryl Pearl?"

"We just do—an' we know it."

"I am done with you, Forceps. You may go. Mind—do not say a word to Harper about this affair. And remember: I am watching you, Forceps. Be careful of yourself; try and lead an honest life. Prison cells are not so very pleasant, you ought to know."

Magic released his hold on the other's throat. As Forceps sidled off toward the window, he observed, however, that the wary detective kept him fully covered by the revolver; anything like a trick wouldn't work there.

In another moment the burglar—considering himself extraordinarily lucky—was making tracks across the garden.

Magic returned to the African who had patiently awaited him at the head of the stairs, and who asked:

"Ded you cotch 'im, sah?"

"You must have made a mistake. I do not find anybody at the shutters. They are all secure," for he had slipped the bolt back into its socket before ascending from the basement.

"You may retire," he added, "and before doing so, suppose you go to the bedroom door of your mistress and say that there is not the slightest danger from burglars."

"Yes, sah."

Having dismissed the African, Magic was about to return to his own apartment, when a sudden thought seemed to strike him.

He made as if to recall the sable attendant.

But that personage had vanished around a turn in the broad hall, and the detective paused.

"No matter, he muttered; "I can do it myself, I guess, without further disturbing the house. Besides, it will be a good thing to see whether that rascal has indeed taken his leave."

He descended the stairs again and sought the rear door which opened into the garden.

Passing out, he stood for several seconds on the top step, appearing to be listening for some sound off in the direction of the dense shrubbery.

"It may be that I have given him a good scare," he muttered, half aloud, again. "He's no doubt taken himself off altogether. But the gate may be open, and other interlopers might enter. I can close it in a minute."

He started toward the gate.

No light shone from the house upon the fragrant garden now; all was gloomy and deserted, though the waters of the still plashing fountain seemed to catch the sly twinkles of the stars and carry them in diamond glitterings amid the softly falling spray.

He walked lightly along the neatly rolled

gravel-way toward the small gate or postern at the far lower end.

His course took him between a clump of shrubbery that was tall and thick, near the arbor, and the darkness was intensified there until one could hardly discern his way ahead.

Suddenly there was a rustling to one side.

He halted.

And while gazing in the direction of the sound with just the slightest suspicion that the recent burglar might be still loitering in the grounds, something transpired that was very near being fatal to him.

From the other side—the side opposite to that whence issued the suspicious sound—there rushed forward a man whose shape was like a specter as dark as the darkness from which he issued so swiftly.

Forward, swift and noiseless he came.

And but for a providential utterance which he let fall as he darted at the detective, is it possible that Magic would have been done for then and there.

In one upraised hand was a club, and a murderous hand gripped it with a savage strength.

"Now, curse you! I guess you'll be put out of my path, you meddler," cried the voice of the unknown, between gritting teeth.

Like the swift revolution of a springy pivot, Magic turned.

As he turned, his faithful black-jack leaped into his hand.

The upraised hand was caught with such suddenness and force that the descending club, jerked from the hold of the hand as the wrist met a resistance, went thudding to the earth.

The black-jack flew out in a spiteful manner.

But the assailant dodged.

Seeing that his attack had been a failure, he wheeled and ran, after wrenching his arm desperately loose from the detective's grasp.

"Not just yet, my fine fellow!" Magic exclaimed. And then: "Ha!" he added, springing forward toward the spot from which had come the first sound indicative of a presence.

For another sound there told that a second party must be concealed within the shrubbery.

This latter party took to his heels with such consummate address that the detective, who pursued promptly, could not overtake him.

The two intruders reached and passed rapidly out at the gate and were lost, or hiding, in the adjacent shadows by the time Magic reached the pave and glanced around him.

"That fellow Forceps again," he concluded, speaking aloud to himself. "So it seems that they had probably not given up the plot to effect an entrance into the house, even after the narrow escape I gave the rogue Forceps. And the other, I presume, was his pal, Harper. All right, my birds, I am laying low for you two, and you will be run in yet, I warrant."

He made secure the gate and, after pausing for a few minutes longer within the shadow of a tree, to see whether there would be any further demonstration, turned and walked back to the house.

When Magic reached his own room he was thinking deeply.

Forceps was positive in regard to the true identity of the beautiful countess.

She must be Julia Diering—the one who had lived in Washington under the name of Beryl Pearl, under which name Harold Hammond sued, in a lover's way, for her hand.

The story told him by Julia, about Harper being her husband divorced, and from whom she was fleeing because of former brutality and present threats, was all bosh—an invention.

She was a woman with a variety of names.

She was an adept at the cards of the farotable.

She was possessed of a quantity of rare diamonds—as he had learned by overhearing the conversation between the detective-police sergeant and his messenger at the window below his own window.

Why, then, should it be so very impossible that she should be the identical Borgia, the Faro Queen, for whom a certain Senor Ludoviq was offering a large reward?

He began to see a little clearer into the character of one who, from his first having supposed her to be a very beautiful and much persecuted girl, was appearing to be in reality a very shrewd woman of the world, of fertile, expedient and merciless preyness upon those with whom she came in contact.

Yes, the Countess de Puillier, the girl Julia Diering, the Washington double of Beryl Pearl and the proprietress of the fashionable gambling-den, the New Orleans mystery and robber of her husband, Borgia, the Faro Queen—all must be one, he finally argued.

Then he settled himself down to working for the vast reward which had been offered by the Senor Ludoviq for the discovery of the woman who had robbed him, or the diamonds of which he had been robbed.

He smiled grimly as he reviewed the threads of the circumstantial cords he was now weaving—laughed to think of the mistake the sergeant was making in piping the countess under the suspicion that she was in some way connected with the red mystery on South Sixth street.

It is said that detectives never sleep.

In the case of Mark Magic there was a slight exception.

Having to his own satisfaction completely arranged for a new basis of operations, he retired to his soft couch and was soon in a profound slumber, as if nothing in the world disturbed his mind in the least.

The only perplexing phase of the case was in regard to Hammond. He felt sure that the beautiful adventuress had purposely eluded him—even after having given him her address in Philadelphia. She had no further use for him. He would have liked much to know what passed at the interview between them on the night when Hammond, direct from his trip over from Washington, called upon her at Mrs. Duffy's.

At about nine o'clock in the morning he was astir.

While arranging his toilet, preparatory to going for his breakfast to the Colonnade, he glanced through the window and observed the countess in the garden engaged in plucking some rosebuds, with which she was adorning her beautiful golden hair in an artless manner.

She looked very unlike the grave, merciless woman who, sitting like a lovely queen behind the table of the green baize on the previous night, had coolly drawn into her drawer beside her the winnings from Mr. Eimenoff and the young broker.

CHAPTER XXII.

A LOVER'S DREAD SUSPENSE.

As Magic looked forth upon the countess, he could not avoid muttering:

"Undoubtedly the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. And strangely, nature has imparted to her an air of the most bewitching innocence, to conceal the claws of the tigress, the ruthlessness of a demon, the heartlessness of an image of stone!"

He resolved to see Hammond briefly.

He felt no apprehension of losing sight of the countess, and he had argued that if any further revelations were to be made, they would be more likely to occur at the card-board, which he knew well enough, would soon, now, be in full blast in room 20, after the broker's experience there.

Leaving the house, and after a good breakfast at the Colonnade, he took a downward bound car for the Continental.

It was an easy matter to find Hammond.

The young man was chafing with impatience to hear from the detective; his night had been an almost sleepless one.

He was in the reading-room, occupied with a paper, and anon looking expectantly up at the sound of every footstep that approached the entrance over the hard-sounding tile flooring.

At last he saw there the Southern-looking gentleman.

"Ah!" hastening forward. "You have come at last."

"I have come as soon as it was convenient to do so. Let us go to your room this time. I have no time to stop for a maneuver at changing this disguise."

They entered the elevator and ascended to Hammond's room.

The young man cast the paper which he had been reading on the table after closing the door.

Magic had advanced to the table to seat himself, and his eyes accidentally rested on a large, flaring heading of type in one of the columns:

"A STRANGE STORY!

"CAREER OF A REMARKABLE WOMAN!"

"STARTLING SEQUEL TO A MYSTERY!"

The same heading that had been clipped from an article in a New Orleans paper and sent to Mark Magic by his chief.

And below followed a reproduction of the article *verbatim*.

"That's a novel account," remarked Hammond, observing that the glance of the detective was fixed momentarily and interestedly upon the item. "You ought to read it up. The mystery is heightened, for I noticed on the register of this hotel this morning the name of Juarez Ludoviq—perhaps the identical Senor Ludoviq of that article."

"Ah!"

"But that has comparatively no interest for me, as you know," Hammond continued. "I want to know about Julia. Have you found out anything new?"

"Mr. Hammond, I think I have a rather unpleasant duty to perform toward you, although it is really a friendly one."

"What can it be?"

"It is in relation to the young lady upon whom you have so wholly bestowed your affections."

Hammond paled slightly.

"You do not mean to say that you have discovered something which may tend to prove that Julia was really murdered?"

"No, I do not. To the contrary, I have almost convincing proof that she is at this moment alive and well."

The color came back to the lover's face—a color of feverish anticipation.

"Well?—well? Tell me, Mr. Magic. Do not keep me in this continued suspense. I must know something definite, or I fear my nerves will give way."

Magic was silent for a few seconds, looking straight into the other's eyes. He was probably weighing whether this lover, so full of a confiding ardor, could bear the revelation that he had resolved to make to him.

The result of the brief and searching gaze was that he determined to go about it in a different way than at first thought of upon leaving the hotel of the countess.

"Do you think," he said, slowly, "that you could continue to love a woman who very plainly does not either love or care for you, and whose life is rather a questionable tissue of romance?"

"What do you mean?" spiritedly.

"Do not become angry," the detective cautioned, calmly. "Remember you have employed me in an official capacity. If I cannot talk plainly with you without your getting into a passion, I shall simply drop the matter right here, and let you go on in the best way you can."

"Pardon my tone. Proceed. Explain your meaning."

"If I undoubtedly show you that you are wasting your affections upon a woman who is not worthy of them, will you abandon the case as you have given it to me? I wish to save you from an error that will cause you lifelong regret."

Hammond was upon his feet, staring and flushed.

"Mr. Magic, what can you mean? You must have a deep meaning, else you would not dare to speak thus of the one woman in all the world whom I hold dear."

"I have a meaning. I will not say anything more, as I see—"

"Go on," urged the other. "Say it—say all. My Heaven! what am I about to hear?" and he began striding to and fro, overwhelmed with the hint thrown out by the cool detective.

"If you will consent to control yourself entirely, not give way to any excitement whatever under a little ordeal I mean to put you through, I will convince you that the girl, the woman, known as Julia Diering, is not a proper person for a young and upright person like yourself to bestow an honored name upon."

Hammond clinched his fists and paused before the speaker, almost glaring at him.

"What are your discoveries?"

"I prefer not to name them, but to show them to you, that you may fairly judge for yourself."

"What am I to do?"

"Enter the presence of the woman."

"When?"

"To-night."

"Where?"

"In a den of faro, of which she is queen—if you know what that means," came like slow thunderbolts from the detective's lips.

With a deep groan, Hammond sunk into a chair, crossing his arms upon the table and bowing his head.

For full a minute silence prevailed in the room.

Somewhat hardened though he was by long professional service with the world, the detective felt rather sorry for the young man; but he argued with himself that he was simply saving Hammond from sacrificing his heart upon an altar that was after all no more than an infatuation, and moreover it was a mercy to do it for the two reasons that Hammond had no right to love the woman because she already had a husband living; and because she was unfit to be the possessor of his love.

The remark that a Senor Ludoviq was at that moment in the city of Philadelphia served to strengthen his belief that the countess was the beautiful adventuress of the article in the papers; her whole life and all her stories, to him and to the young man, and in fact to any one with whom she came in contact, were tissues of falsehood artfully contrived and very apt to deceive by the seeming straightforwardness with which they were told by the red, pearly-backed lips.

Hammond looked up eagerly.

"You could have no object in wounding me intentionally," he said, hoarsely.

"That is not at all likely, Mr. Hammond. No, I am honestly trying to save you from yourself."

"I give myself and actions into your hands. Do as you please. I will obey whatever you shall command, if—if you can prove what you say you can."

"I can."

"Instruct me."

"I shall disguise you so that she will never recognize you. Together we will enter the place where this beautiful witch—for she is scarcely less—presides. It will probably require your strongest exercise of nerve."

"You will find me equal to the occasion," was the quick response, with compressed lips.

A short conversation further ensued between them, in which the detective arranged for him to enter the house of the countess as a guest and

lodger and one addicted to the habit of frequenting the faro-table.

Then he left the young man, with the understanding that together they would see the countess that evening.

Magic returned to the mansion on Chestnut street.

He confined himself to his room until afternoon, when he again sought the Colonnade for his dinner.

Eimenoff and the young broker and the broker's partner had also engaged to take meals at the hotel, and occupied seats near Magic, between whom and the rest were exchanged nods of courteous recognition.

After the meal, all repaired back to "The Bachelors'."

"So we shall have the mutual honor of madame's favor this afternoon, it seems," remarked the Russian-looking Eimenoff, addressing the young broker.

"In what way?"

"Why, are not you and I to drive out with her?"

"I was not aware of it," in some surprise. "I invited the lady to drive with me to Fairmount."

"So she informed me, and insisted, as she would go, of course, in her own carriage, that I should be one of the party."

"Indeed!"

This was a disagreeable astonisher for the love-stricken broker, who had anticipated an afternoon alone with the wondrously beautiful being who was exercising over him, though she might not be aware of it, the influence of an enchantress.

He said nothing, but Magic, who had overheard, saw that he bit his lips until they nearly bled.

The countess appeared to have made up her mind that she would do nothing to bring about a feeling of rivalry among her guests in connection with herself.

She would only consent to drive out if accompanied by more than one gentleman, so that there would be a party to make the occasion more reserved.

And under this arrangement, her own magnificent turnout came around to the door at the hour of four o'clock, and Eimenoff and the broker, gallantly vying with one another in attention to the countess, assisted her to her seat, when the three were driven away by the liveried lackey and his companion footman.

It was nearly dark when they returned.

Magic did not witness their arrival; he was enjoying a cigar in the flowery arbor.

The arbor was but a few steps from the gate through which Harper and Forceps had effected an entrance on a former occasion.

As he lounged idly there, he saw Mr. Eimenoff approach the gate and open it, after a glance around as if to make sure that he was not observed.

A man entered, stepping quickly a short distance away from the gate into the screening growth of the bushes.

Securing the gate again, Eimenoff joined him.

"Hardly any danger of the countess pouncing upon us," he said and the words came plainly to Magic. "She's retired to her room to change her driving habit. The note I sent you from the park was sent while I was ordering juleps for the party, which I insisted upon doing, while we halted for a space at the pavilion saloon near George's Hill. This woman is a shrewd one if ever was. She knows her business at deception thoroughly. She has told me a remarkable story of her husband, the count, their travels in Europe and so forth. She is on her guard to a dot and a ready inventor. I have given up the hope that she will either betray herself or lead me up to her accomplice in the murder. I must proceed differently. She must be arrested and charged directly with a knowledge of the crime, probably then she will be frightened into a confession. I shall go through her private rooms to-night while she is engaged down-stairs with her guests as is her custom. If I can find the velvet belt that held the diamonds, we will have a point that may bring her to terms, as it can be identified by two witnesses who knew it to be in the possession of the murdered girl. Lay these suggestions before the chief and bring me word as to my course. I will see you at this same place after dark."

The man departed with these hurried instructions.

Eimenoff turned to re-enter the house, when a hand fell on his elbow detainingly.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A STRANGE ARRIVAL AT "THE BACHELORS'."

EIMENOFF was considerably astonished.

He had felt assured that no one was near the spot upon which he had interviewed the messenger from detective headquarters.

Recognizing the Southerner, he said:

"Ah, you rather surprised me."

"A word, Mr. Eimenoff."

"Certainly, sir. Happy to oblige."

"Sergeant," said Magic, abruptly, "I think the time has arrived when it would be judicious for you and I to become intimately acquainted."

"I don't exactly understand," protested Eimenoff, raising his brows at the address of "sergeant."

"Then I will explain. In the first place, you are really a sergeant of police on the Philadelphia force—"

"Eh! What's that?" broke in the other, starting with well-assumed astonishment.

"Come, sergeant, what is the use in you and I playing at opposites one with the other."

"You say I am a sergeant?"

"Of course."

"Well, that's good—ha, ha! A sergeant. And pray, who was your informant? Who gave you this really surprising item?"

"The man you were just now conversing with. Do not blame him, though," Magic added, hastily, as he saw a frown gather on the other's brow. "He did not do so knowingly. I overheard your conversation with him at your window yesterday."

"The deuce you did!" burst from the sergeant, who realized that if such was the case, there was no use in playing the comedy of denial.

"Will you please look at that?" and Magic handed him a card.

The card bore the name and announcement:

"MARK MAGIC.

"MARSHAL'S OFFICE,

"Baltimore, Md."

"You are a detective?"

"I am."

"Then I shall not endeavor to conceal myself from you," extending his hand.

"The time has come when it is really imperative that you and I, sergeant, should become acquainted. I say imperative."

"Why do you say imperative?"

"Because you are about to commit a very great blunder that will result in your losing a large reward that might otherwise fall into your pocket."

"What's it all about? Speak out, Mr. Magic."

"I heard you just now say that you were about to close in on the countess under the suspicion that she was concerned in the murder of the girl on Sixth street—"

"But just let me relate the circumstances, and you will surely agree with me," broke in the sergeant.

Magic in turn interrupted:

"You are about to make a great blunder. You must not do anything at all like what you are now intending."

"If you heard what I said to my subordinate, you know my plan to be to frighten the woman by confronting her with the belt that contained the missing diamonds, and which can be identified. Do you not think it will work?"

"Decidedly not."

"What is your reason for disagreeing on this point?"

"The best in the world."

And leaning closer, Magic said, in a lower tone:

"The Countess de Puillier is that very same girl herself—the girl supposed to have been murdered!"

For a space the sergeant was dumfounded. Then he affected a laugh of incredulity.

"You may laugh," said Magic, gravely. "But let me inform you I have been on the track of the woman ever since she left Baltimore. She is the girl, Julia Diering; she is more than that; and I can give you a few pointers that will open your eyes before I am through. If you proceed in what you have informed your subordinate is your immediate intention, you will kill the reward that is even now in the market for bigger game than the mere unmasking of a masquerader, which would be the only result to your plan. We are brother detectives. I candidly confess I would not let you into a great secret which I hold, but for my having discovered that you were about to break the whole thing up by your precipitancy. If you will come to my room, I will give you the whole case, provided that it is understood that we share alike in whatever fame or money may accrue."

"Agreed!" exclaimed the sergeant, who at once saw that Magic knew full well what he was talking about.

The two repaired to the room of the Baltimore detective.

A lengthy conversation ensued between the two sleuths.

It was fully dark before the sergeant emerged from the conference with his brother of the profession.

They fully understood one another; and at the moment the sergeant was one of the most surprised men imaginable.

He hurried to keep his appointment with his subordinate at the garden-gate, having assured himself that the countess was engrossed with entertaining several gentlemen in the parlors.

As Magic was descending the stairs, he heard voices at the front-door, and saw there, beneath the electric lights, a strange-looking female.

She was attired in a garb of Gypsy arrangement. She carried a child in her arms.

Her face was decidedly of a Gypsy or mulatto cast, or perhaps of an Indian darkness, wherein two brilliant eyes were directed upon the sable usher who had confronted her as she started to make her way deliberately forward along the hall.

"I have come," she said, in a sonorous voice, "to see the Countess de Puillier."

"Yes, ma'am, but the countess am engaged, ma'am, jes' at de present time. Ef you's jes' kem back yarh 'bout some time to-morrow, ma'am, I guesses she'll maybe see you—"

"I wish to see the countess now—at once!" said the woman.

And after another of those piercing glances at the African she said, drawing a ring from her finger.

"Take this to her and say to her that the owner is here."

The ring was something to dazzle the eyes of a beholder less susceptible than the ignorant African.

A heavy band of chased gold, mounted with a large emerald, around which were double rows of small diamonds that glowed and sparkled, under the electric lights, like a thing of fire.

Of immense value it certainly was, and the sight of such a jewel in the possession of the woman seemed to have a quick effect upon the man, who took the rather strange bauble of introduction gingerly between his fingers, placed it on a salver and hastened into the parlors.

Magic remained standing on the staircase.

Here was a development.

The nurse and the child—both Julia Diering's according to her own statement.

It hardly seemed likely that two women—the countess and Julia Diering—should have, wrapt up in their lives, a child and a nurse, both absent under peculiar circumstances, and both of the children males.

Hardly two minutes elapsed before the sable attendant returned, saying:

"De countess say you's please foller me up de sta'rs to her room," with a bow, for the reception of the introductory ring had been followed by the command.

"Show this comer at once to my own private rooms, and say that I will be with her immediately."

The Indian-faced being passed on up the stairs, following the African.

Magic caught a glimpse of the child in her arms sufficient to show him that it was a boy and that the youngster was fast asleep.

He continued on into the parlors by the rear door, observing that madame just then emerged by the door toward the front of the hall and hastened up the stairs after her strange visitor.

In the room of the countess a tableau presently transpired.

Entering swiftly, she hurried to the side of the woman, crying:

"Barbara! Barbara! faithful one! you have come!"

"I obeyed the letter, mistress. Here is Willie."

"And oh! is he well?" bending over the sleeping child tenderly, as he lay on the lounge where the woman had placed him.

"He is well."

"Be at home, Barbara—lay off your things. Remember, my home is your home always," said madame, without looking toward the woman, but seeming to be absorbed to the depths of her soul with contemplating the sleeping child.

"I thank you, mistress."

In an impulse, madame leaned and imprinted a kiss upon the pure lips reposing there.

The child moved restlessly.

"It is best not to disturb him," observed the woman, lowly. "He is tired with traveling. I lost no time when you said to me to come. I am here."

"Oh, Barbara, if you could only know how I have longed to see and press to my heart once more this precious darling!"

"I have guarded him well, mistress."

"Ah, I knew you would."

"And your summons came in very good time."

"How, Barbara?"

"I have disposed of the last one."

"The last? You have gotten rid of every diamond?"

"Yes."

"And the money, Barbara?"

"Is safe—here," giving her waist a significant tap.

"Surely you could not carry so much money about you as I know you must have realized from the sale of the diamonds?"

The woman smiled.

"No, but in a belt which I wear are drafts on the banks for great amounts."

"You are expeditious and cautious, Barbara. You shall have your reward, never fear. But let me order refreshments for you. I know you must be very tired and perhaps hungry."

There was no objection to this.

And summoning her servant by a touch upon a little knob at one side of the room, madame

ordered a bountiful repast to be prepared for her strange visitor.

While waiting for its coming, and after a lingering glance toward the child which she seemed anxious should awaken, madame went to the woman's side, seating herself and taking the dark-skinned hands in her own.

"I have had much of trial since I parted from you and Willie," she said, wearily. "I have been pursued, haunted, by the two men who you remember were connected with my establishment at Washington. And more: I found a detective on my track, keeping so close that I grew alarmed. At a favorable moment I made as if I had resolved to commit suicide. We were on the boat when I noticed that he was shadowing me. I ran to the rail of the guard and made as if I would have cast myself overboard. He stepped in, as I anticipated he would, and prevented what he thought to be a mad deed. My object? To delude him. I succeeded. His sympathy was excited, and I easily invented a tale or a part of one to keep up the delusion. He still followed me, however, and it actually seemed that he had taken a sympathetic interest in me to save me from the men I feared. To carry out my deception, I met him during one night and told him a tale that was partly true and partly false, and pointing to the man, Harper, as my divorced husband. My object was to get him off my track. In this I succeeded, for his sympathy grew unbounded. Then I carried out the plan I had at first conceived. I had taken a situation with a woman who keeps a millinery shop on a street in this city; my object in that was to try and throw my pursuers off my track. But then, when I found the detective so close—and his object I could only guess at with apprehension, in regard to my husband, you know—I consummated another scheme by which I believed I could escape both the detective and the men who were so persistently on my trail to secure Willie and through him a confession from me as to the hiding-place of the diamonds. Look at this, Barbara," and she bared one of her beautiful white arms to the woman's gaze, pointing to a wound over the great blue vein at the hollow of the elbow joint.

The wound was not yet wholly healed where she had evidently bled herself.

"What is it, mistress?"

"With my own blood I had to carry out a deception that has startled the city for the past few days. My blood I smeared over the things in the room I occupied with the milliner; then I fled in the darkness of the night. The detective I have eluded; but my enemies—ah, I fear I have not yet done with them, for they confronted me in my garden here only yesterday."

CHAPTER XXIV.

"I WOULD STAB HIM TO THE HEART!"

THE words uttered by madame to the Indian woman reveal that she was indeed the mysterious Julia Diering of the earlier part of our narrative.

And had madame known that at the very moment of this little speech of revelation there were other ears than those of the woman listening to what she said, she would probably have been thrilled to her soul's center.

Madame's room was at the extreme back of the upper hall, where a single long, heavily-curtained window, with the curtain dragged artistically aside on burnished holders, opened on the view of the garden scarcely three steps from madame's door.

At the very instant that she ascended to see the stranger who had arrived with the child, the Russian-looking Eimenoff was entering the house from the garden, where he had been to see and reinstruct the subordinate who was to meet him there.

In such a manner as to cause no other observation than that he was probably seeking his own room, Eimenoff ascended the stairs also; but he tip-toed toward the door of madame's room instead of toward his own chamber.

He had caught a brief glimpse of the Indian woman and her burden.

He was at the door, his ear bent to the keyhole when madame summoned the servant and gave the order for refreshments: the convenient position of the curtains at the hall window afforded him a concealment until the door was again closed.

All that the countess said was distinctly overheard by him as he pressed his ear close to the keyhole.

At the end of the sentence which closed the last chapter, he heard the servant returning with the waiter of refreshments, and slipped quickly out of sight again behind the curtains.

Placing herself, the waiter of jellies, fruit, cake and wine before the woman whom she had addressed as Barbara, and for whom she appeared to entertain an unlimited attachment, the countess resumed, waving her companion to the feast:

"Yes, I think I have eluded the meddlesome detective, who might have learned too much of my affairs had I not completely thrown him off the scent for awhile so that I could perfect the little plan for my disappearance. My two enemies—that Harper and Forceps, you know—un-

dertook to browbeat me in the garden yesterday, when I quietly held them at the point of my revolver, determined to show them that I was no longer to be bullied. And I say it to you, Barbara, that I would no sooner hesitate at killing one or both of them than I would at shooting a mad dog that might cross my path with his jaws open to bite me."

"Right, my mistress. They are the scum of the worst on the earth; it is better that all such should be wiped away. You will do well to shoot them if they molest you any more. Do not flee from, but face them—face them boldly."

"Such is my intention."

The woman was eating heartily. While she listened respectfully to the words of the beautiful woman whom she called mistress with evident pleasure, however, there was an apparent look of anxiety in her swart face.

Her looks and actions were as if she had something on her mind, to speak which she was waiting for an opportunity without interrupting the countess rudely.

"Everything is very grand about you here, my mistress," she said, sipping the delicious wine slowly.

"Ah, Barbara, you know I was always accustomed to luxury, until that tragic time when we fled from New Orleans."

"Nothing is too good for you, my mistress."

And the woman added, after a second's pause:

"Why should you not shine as the brightest star among women? You are beautiful, vigorous yet, and you have seen enough of the men to prevent your ever tying your soul and body again to one of them, I am sure. Is it not so?"

The countess sighed.

"Perhaps my lesson should have been sufficient, Barbara, but I fear I am not wholly impregnable."

Barbara elevated her black eyebrows in surprise.

"I had thought that your heart had turned to stone, my mistress!" she said, half-inquiringly.

"And I imagined so too, Barbara. But there has come one into my life whom I know to be a true and honorable man, and for whom I have dared to permit myself to feel an attachment. I am treating him rather cruelly at the present moment; but it is because I am driven to it by necessity. Had I not eluded him also, I might have gained an unpleasant notoriety by being forced to apply for a divorce from the lunatic who made my previous life so miserable. My only safety, my only repose, is to be found in utterly concealing my true identity, which could not be done if I sought my divorce—a matter, though, that I could easily accomplish under the circumstance of the senor's insanity. So, alas, I endure another thorn in my checkered path—"

"My mistress," interrupted Barbara, hesitatingly.

"Well?"

"I fear you are not aware of all that you should be."

"What do you mean, Barbara?"

"Do you read the newspapers?"

"Ah, I have not had the time to look at them, I have been so very busy lately with this great house of mine—for I am about to buy it," said the countess.

"It is as I feared."

"What did you fear, Barbara?"

"You do not realize your whole danger."

"Danger?" and a slight paleness overspread the lovely features.

But she added, with renewed color:

"Oh, I am becoming accustomed to danger, Barbara."

"You have not met with any so great as that which now threatens, my mistress," said the woman, mysteriously.

"Explain."

For reply Barbara drew a folded newspaper from the pocket of her Gypsy dress and handed it over with her brown finger indicating a certain column where there was a heading in bold, black type.

The lustrous eyes of madame fell upon that significant caption:

"A STRANGE STORY.

"CAREER OF A REMARKABLE WOMAN.

"STARTLING SEQUEL TO A MYSTERY."

Then, as Madame de Puillier proceeded to read the article which followed the prominent heading, Barbara continued to eat in silence, watching the beautiful face of her mistress.

Presently the countess exclaimed:

"Why, this is of myself!"

"True—of you," rejoined the Indian.

The first part was read through steadily and with considerable interest.

But when her eyes caught the announcement in the portion headed "the sequel," that the Senor Ludoviq was alive, well, thoroughly recovered from his temporary insanity, and was then instituting rigorous measures for the discovery of the woman who had robbed him, or the diamonds she had robbed him of, the color faded out of the soft cheeks of the countess.

A startled, hunted look came into the brilliant orbs.

"Barbara!" nervously refolding the paper and turning a blank look upon her swarthy companion.

"Well, my mistress?"

"Who could have foreseen this thing? He is, then, following a trail after me."

"So I think."

"Then that is the true secret of my finding the detective so close. Ah, he must have had a suspicion."

"Possibly."

"What is to be done?" asked the countess, with just the slightest accent of despair.

"I have no head for plotting, my mistress. But I can execute the plots of others, as you have learned. Do you say what we shall do, and I am ready to aid—aid with my life!"

They looked at one another searchingly for a few seconds.

A terrible thought must have come into the brain of the countess, for she said, lowering her voice:

"Barbara, sooner than have that man lay his hand on me again I would stab him to the heart!"

"And you would be quite right," declared Barbara, her dusky eyes glowing with a transient fire.

"Sooner than see you," added the woman, intensely, "again in his power, I would myself drive a knife to his very soul!"

"You would do this for me, Barbara?"

"Ay, twice over."

"Then we must ascertain the whereabouts of the Senor Ludoviq, and if we find that he is determined to drag me again back into the hateful and dangerous chains he wove around me from the time of our first meeting in London, he must be removed from our path—this time to a certainty!"

"Mine be the hand to do the deed if it is best."

The dialogue between the two was interrupted by a tap at the door at that moment.

Going herself to see what was wanted, the countess was informed by her able usher, the African, that the gentlemen below were asking for madame, the hour being then near nine o'clock.

"I will join them directly," was her message; and returning for a moment to Barbara's side, she said: "I am conducting a game in this house, Barbara, and it is already under fair headway. I shall at least wait to fleece the fools who come to the table before fleeing further. For that we must flee from this terrible Juarez Ludoviq, is certain."

"Why did not you be advised by me, my mistress, in the first, and seek a clime far from this unfortunate America—unfortunate for you?"

"We will advise together later, Barbara. Watch well over my child, my Willie," with a wistful glance at the still-slumbering child on the lounge. "I may not rejoin you until at an hour in the morning. You will find a couch in yonder alcove; I had it prepared, expecting your arrival. You are not to be removed from my sight any more than is unavoidable."

With this, the countess started from her luxurious rooms to join the gentlemen who were waiting, she well knew, for the faro-table to be opened to the anxious players.

While this scene had been transpiring in madame's rooms, an incident also took place in the grand hall below.

The comely young girl who had been engaged to play at the piano every other night had been offered an additional salary by madame to play every evening until another performer could be secured to play upon the alternate nights.

She had arrived and was on her way to a little dressing-room where her employer placed at her disposal fitting dresses to be assumed during the hours of her employment.

Near the balustrade, she encountered the Southerner.

With a motion so quick that it was accomplished before she realized what was intended, he slipped a missive into her hand and passed on out of the house.

In the dressing-room, she read, with astonished eyes:

"I promised to be your friend if the occasion arose. I now deem it my duty, under that promise, to warn you that certain events are likely to transpire in this house at any moment which may bring all in it into unpleasant prominence. With the utmost confidence in your purity, and desiring to save your reputation from any possible tarnish, I say: leave here without delay. Do not even stop to see your employer. Inclosed you will find more, I think, than your salary would amount to for the short time you have been here. Do not hesitate to accept it, and act promptly and with secrecy."

The missive contained a twenty-dollar note.

In a flutter of excitement the young girl fled from the dressing-room and from the house, drawing her veil tight about her face in a fear that some one on the street might see her coming from the mysterious dwelling.

In her heart she felt that the Southerner had indeed proved himself a gentleman and a friend by his timely advice; for there entered into her

pure mind thoughts of terror at some nameless danger which she was escaping through this urgent warning.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE MODEST DEMAND OF TWO OLD ROGUES.

AT about the hour of eight o'clock of the evening that was marked by the arrival of the Indian woman and the child at the "The Bachelors," there was a caller at a prominent detective agency on North Fifth street and not very far from the mayor's office.

A tall, robust, dark-featured and foreign-looking man who was attired in the most elegant mode of fashion.

His whole appearance indicated a personage of some wealth.

His carriage was that of one completely at ease in any circumstance—a man of the world who could twirl his black and long-ended mustache complacently or gaze indifferently from the depths of his jetty eyes, in the presence of any surroundings.

His voice, when he spoke, was deep and dignified.

"I have called, if you please, to see the chief member of this firm of detectives, if he is in," he announced.

"Yes, sir, in a moment."

The clerk entered a rear room and presently returned with the request:

"Please step inside, sir. The chief is at leisure."

"Thank you."

The visitor entered the room in a stately manner.

Seated at a side table was a business-looking individual who fixed a pair of shrewd eyes on the comer immediately, while he said:

"You wish to see me, sir? Be seated, please," indicating a chair near himself.

"I present you with my card," said the caller, pausing to extend a small, perfumed pasteboard before availing of the chair.

The detective read on the card:

"JUAREZ LUDOVIC."

And at once he aspirated, while his shrewd eyes again settled on his visitor:

"A-h!"

"I have called upon a business matter," said the Senor Ludoviq.

"I shall be pleased to hear what it is," rejoined the detective; though instantly upon reading the name he recognized in that name the name of the man who was concerned in the romantic account of the diamond robbery in New Orleans and the flight of Borgia, the Faro Queen, with the vast treasure.

The affair was going the rounds of the press at a lively rate.

"It is possible," said the measured voice of the senor, "that you have heard of me through the article which these newspaper men are publishing so widely? I am the Ludoviq of the article. I am in search of the woman who was and is my wife, and who has robbed me of a million or more in diamonds. I have set the detectives of nearly every city between here and New Orleans to work upon the case—the finding of her I mean; I now come to Philadelphia upon a similar errand. I have offered a large reward for the success of the search. I desire that you enter the list with the best talent you have. And if funds are required in advance, do not hesitate to apprise me of it, for I am well able to pay to almost any amount. The wretch of a woman did not so nearly ruin me as she perhaps thought she would," he concluded, with grimness and an expression of face that was something between a smile and a snarling curve of the lips beneath the heavy mustache, while his jetty eyes had in them a momentarily ignescent glare.

"Yes, I am posted a little through the press in regard to your affair, Senor Ludoviq. And do you know, I have thought there is a fine point to be considered."

"What is that?"

"Can a woman rob her husband—I say, can she?"

"You will find," declared the senor, in a tone that seemed to grow even more deeply sonorous, "that a woman cannot with impunity attempt the assassination of her husband and then rob him of all that he is supposed to possess in the world! If I can but find her I will take all chances of securing my satisfaction for the bullet which I am now carrying in my head, and which was fired into my brain by her hand. And since the recovery of my reason and my statement to the authorities, it seems that there was one on that tragic night who did see the occurrence—I mean my wife's attempt to kill me—but who had the circumstance blotted from his memory by the exciting events at the immediate time. My statement recalled it to him vividly. He will testify."

"Can you give me an exact description of the woman?"

"More; I have here her photograph," and the senor, with quiet deliberateness, handed over a photograph of the woman, Borgia, the Faro Queen.

Duplicates of the photograph were by that

time in the hands of many detective agencies, he informed this firm.

The detective studied the features for a moment.

"She was really your wife?" he queried.

"As much so as the priest could make her."

"And, may I ask, did you have any idea that she could have come as far north as Philadelphia?"

"I have no definite idea whatever. I am on my way to traverse the whole length and breadth of the land, so stern is my determination to find the would-be murderess."

"And have you any idea that you will be able to recover any portion of the diamonds, which you say amount to a million or more, even in the event of your coming up with her?"

"I cannot surmise, sir; I am simply in earnest in my quest. I shall not hesitate to employ the best, the most expensive talent. I will pay twenty thousand dollars for her apprehension, and I will deposit five thousand dollars in advance for probable expenses at the start."

The detective could not avoid an inward admittance that the senior was decidedly in earnest if he purposed spending his money in this manner to accomplish the object.

"Since you must know pretty well the circumstances," the senior continued, "by having read of the affair in the papers—and the accounts are correct, I may say—it is only necessary for me to ask whether you will take a hand in the matter?"

"Oh, of course, we will not refuse to lend our aid in the case," the other hastened to say. "But have you discovered, or have any others whom you have engaged, anything that may prove a clew to this trail?"

"I have no communication with those I engage after engaging them. I leave my check with the understanding that I do not wish to be dragged hither and thither to see whether certain discoveries by the detectives are or are not reliable. When the woman is found—positively found, and there can be no doubt of it—I can be apprised by telegraph, and then I will visit the scene of the arrest. The reward is ready as soon as I set my eyes upon her. I ask no more than that—to set my eyes on her while she is being held by the authorities. For I tell you she will never be released, once I confront her."

"It looks as if you seek more to revenge yourself upon her than to secure the lost diamonds," remarked the detective.

"Perhaps. I will not say."

And the senior added, in a slow, business manner, producing a check-book:

"Since you agree to work for me in the matter, here is the money I say I shall leave to inaugurate the chase," and he filled up the check for five thousand dollars.

"Where shall we communicate with you if we are successful?"

"If you will glance at my card again, you will observe that my address at the city of New Orleans is there. I had them prepared for the purpose. Do not communicate, I repeat, unless all possible doubt is removed as to whether you have the right woman in your power. I have no time to waste; every hour is devoted to this, my life object. I leave the city to-night for New York, and shall there place other agencies at the work. Thence I go to Boston."

"Our work, then, is only to be confined to Philadelphia, as I understand it?"

"You understand aright. And now I will bid you good-day."

The senior arose and stalked in a dignified way from the private office, being accompanied by the detective as far as the outer door.

Hardly had Senior Ludoviq taken his departure when there were two new visitors at the agency.

The clerk came upon his employer just as the latter was going out to ascertain as to the genuineness of the check that had been so lavishly handed over to him before he had even attempted any work on the strange case of Borgia, the Faro Queen.

"Two gentlemen to see you, sir."

"Send them in."

And into the private office walked Berry Harper and his associate rascal, Forceps.

"How do you do, gentlemen. What can I do for you?"

The pair were attired in new suits, though of a cheap quality, and presented a rather genteel appearance.

Harper took it upon himself to state the object of their visit to the agency.

"The question's just the other way, I reckon," he said. "I am a-going to ask whether you wouldn't like us chaps to do something handsome for you?"

"Well, I don't know whether I would or not," was the response, as the detective's keen eyes read pretty well the character of the man the moment he began to speak.

And he interrogated:

"What is your business with me?"

"Oh, we've just riffled the trumpiest racket ever you heard of!" exclaimed Harper, with a beaming face.

"You have, eh?"

"An' I reckon we'll live in clover with the money for awhile," pursued Harper, with a

variety of sanguine gestures, while Forceps grinned complacently.

"Oh, you've just got out of jail, eh, an' are going to make a big haul as the first start in an honest life. I am glad to hear of your prospects, gentlemen; you deserve encouragement—"

"Jail!" broke forth Harper, with a splutter of disgust. "No, we haven't been in any jail. You don't know what kind of an insult you're puttin' on us. We're on a lay that's to turn out a full hand for both of us—a pile of money; an' you're the man who's going to put up the ducats."

"Indeed?" exclaimed the detective, easily.

"Yes, we want ten thousand dollars for our share. We give you the racket and you do the work; but we want half."

"Oh, you want half?"

"That's it."

"Half of what?" he asked, surveying the couple with some amusement.

"Why, half the reward."

"You are hot after some reward, eh?"

"We are, I know—an' don't you forget it."

"Oh, I shall certainly remember it. But, gentlemen, please elucidate a little. This is all a conundrum to me, you see; in fact you two are a pair of conundrums, for that matter. And as I really haven't much spare time on my hands, suppose you come right out and tell me what it's all about."

"Why don't you come to the point with the gentleman," suggested Forceps, who would have preferred to expedite matters, as he did not like—the old rogue!—to be there under the keen eyes of the sleuth who was aching all the time to bag just such fellows as himself.

"Ain't I a-comin' to it?" said Harper, a little truculently to his companion, and adapting his manner of speech to the rather coarse habiliments of his person. "I reckon I know my business in this here thing. Wasn't it me that first had the idee?"

"Yes," admitted Forceps.

"Well, then, you hold your mouth while I put it plain to the gentleman."

And turning to the detective, he said:

"You're the head of this detective house, ain't you?"

"I am."

"Don't you pay for valuable information?"

"As a general thing, yes—if it is valuable."

"I've got the valuable article."

"What is it?"

"The price is ten thousand dollars."

"You hold your information at a modest figure."

"Tain't a cent mor'n it's worth."

"Well, what is it?"

"You've heard of the woman called Borgia, the Faro Queen?"

"The Faro Queen!" uttered the detective, a little astonished.

"That's what I said."

"Well, what of her?"

"For ten thousand dollars right down—placed in my hand—this here hand, do you see it?—I can show you just where to lay your claws onto the woman, an' no mistake!"

As Harper made the surprising announcement, he slapped one palm on the other, to indicate exactly where the money was to be deposited, and gazed straight into the detective's face.

CHAPTER XXVI.

CRUSHING AN IDOL OF LOVE.

THE chief of this particular bureau had, in mind, set down his two visitors as old "timers."

He was too experienced, however, to pass idly by the words of Harper, which so emphatically asserted his ability to place the detectives directly on the track of the hunted woman.

"Oh, pshaw!" he exclaimed, with affected incredulity. "You fellows have been reading about this thing in the papers, and you just have a sort of an idea that you have struck right on to the heroine of the romance—"

"Hold on—hold on. You're 'way off, you are," broke from Harper, with a wave of his hand. "And me an' my pard ain't to be bluffed into giving you any broad hints, don't you forget that."

"You really believe you have got the woman down fine?"

"Knowing is believing, isn't it?"

"How do you know it?"

"Oh, of course, we're going to up an' tell you all about it," said Harper, with a leer that brought one eye completely to a close over his side-cocked nose.

"Come, come, if you have such information as you say you have, of course we'll pay liberally for it—say a few hundred dollars."

"Pay what?" and Harper leaned forward, with one palm spread behind his ear, as if to catch a repetition of the words more fully; while Forceps gazed disgustedly at his partner.

"We'll be willing to pay a few hundred dollars."

"All right. There'll be a man along here by and by, I reckon, who will be aching for to give you the information we can—an' nobody else can, mind—and you can drive a bargain with him. The price is ten thousand dollars."

"Suppose we hold you under the charge of

secreting a criminal?" the detective suggested, with a nod.

"Oh, we ain't quite so green as you imagine. You can hold all you want to; but don't forget that we'll make you prove the charge, an' we'll make you sweat in the end," he added, boldly; "for we ain't a-holding any criminal, we ain't. Why, bless your noddle, she's just a-dashin' it round town as brazen as a hoss to a park phaeton right under your nose."

And Harper demanded, with an air of importance:

"Is it a go? Will you pony up the ten thou—"

"No, old man, I won't."

"That settles it. Come, Forceps."

As the pair started promptly toward the door, Harper turned partly around without pausing, and said:

"I reckon we can easy enough raise the raffle on this trump racket with some of the other detectives that the papers say are on the track of the woman. For I tell you, we can place the hand of any detective plump on her shoulder inside of half an hour, we can. So good-by to you, an' when you see somebody else a-wadin' in an' scoopin' the ducats that you've lost—for I know the reward is double that—you can scratch your head and hire a man to kick you around town for a jackass, that's all!"

The detective half-started from his chair to resent the other's impudence, though hitherto he had been simply amused by the pair.

He did not in the remotest degree credit their assertion that they knew where to find and capture the hunted woman.

His chief reason for thus thinking was, that had they really known what they claimed, why did they not themselves step in and gain the whole reward, without pausing to divide it with the detectives?

The truth was, though it might never have been guessed by any one but Mark Magic, the mode of procedure was according to Forceps's request, after he had acquainted his partner with the result of his attempt to rob "The Bachelors," notwithstanding he had been warned by Magic to say nothing of the matter.

This much Forceps ventured; and then he accepted the plan proposed by Harper, who had read the papers and "tumbled" to a pretty clear suspicion regarding the identity of the countess, to offer the information to the detectives.

They never for a moment doubted their ability to drive a quick bargain and had plumed themselves in advance.

Rather in advance, it appeared!

They went out from the detective bureau in a humor of combined anger and disgust at their failure.

"But we won't give it up that way, will we, Forceps?"

"Right, we won't," agreed Forceps, as they entered Chestnut street and moved westward.

"We might as well jump this town, then, an' try to make a bargain further South. I reckon when the detectives learn down there that they can just slide up here an' take the woman right from under the noses of the Philadelphia detectives, we won't have much trouble scooping in that ten thousand."

"But I say, Harper, isn't ten thousand a little high?"

"High be blowed! Soon as I saw in the afternoon paper that this Senior What's-his-name was offering twenty thousand, I decided that half was none too much for the information we could give. Why, if it wasn't for the warning you got from that man Magic, I'd step in an' gobble the whole caboodle, I would—"

"Yes, yes," Forceps hastened to say. "We must do it through the detectives. I'm afraid of the man Magic. If he finds me a-doin' of this thing when he warned me to quit fooling after the girl, he'd make it cussed warm for me, I'm a-thinking, and nary grab at all at the reward would I get."

And thus talking upon their affairs, the two made their way amid the blazing lights of Chestnut street.

When Mark Magic left "The Bachelors," after giving the note of timely warning to the young girl, as we have seen, he straightway sought the Continental Hotel.

A quick glance around as he entered the space before the office counter showed him that Harold Hammond was not there.

He appeared to be pleased with this fact.

Advancing to the counter, he said:

"I desire to see the Senior Ludoviq."

"Very sorry, sir, but you are just too late."

"Too late?"

"Yes, the senior's trunks were sent off for New York this afternoon, and he settled his bill here a half hour ago, giving up his room and saying that he would not return, but seek the depot after attending to some business."

Magic glanced at the broad face of the clock.

He saw that there had been a train for the north timed to leave at about five minutes before his arrival at the hotel.

It was a slight slip, for he had intended to interview the senior in regard to the woman, Borgia.

He knew that he had Borgia within reach of

his arm at any moment he should choose to outstretch his hand to grasp her.

The reward of twenty thousand dollars was his—if he could have seen Senor Ludoviq before his departure for New York.

"I hardly think any other will find the woman," he consoled himself by thinking. "Meantime, I might as well carry out this little programme with Hammond."

Entering the elevator, he ascended to Hammond's room.

The young man was impatiently awaiting his arrival.

But beyond this evident impatience, there was no sign of nervousness in muscle or feature which the detective discerned after a keen glance.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"All ready."

"Come, then; we will not lose any time. I expect the game has already been opened by this time. I have arranged for your disguise at a place on our way there."

The two hastened from the hotel to a costumer's on Tenth street above Market.

Emerging from here a short time afterward, Hammond was completely disguised, and wearing, besides the foreign-cut garments, a dense beard of an agreeable auburn color.

They made their way to "The Bachelors'."

As Magic had anticipated, the parlors below were almost entirely deserted, and he was pleased to notice that the young pianist had evidently taken his advice and left the dangerous environ.

Leading his companion up the broad staircase, he approached room 20, and knocked in a signaling way.

The door was opened by the black usher, and they stood in the almost dazzling blaze of the faro-room.

The den of the tiger was there in full blast; the beautiful tigress, with her claws of velvet and merciless heart, was manipulating the fatal cards, scarcely raising her lustrous eyes to see who had come in to make an addition to the rather large number who were engaged at the game.

Her idea had not been erroneous.

During that day several new lodgers had arrived for "The Bachelors'"; many of them were intimate friends of the young broker, who had initiated them into the secret of the palatial lodging-house on Chestnut street, and the fact of its beautiful proprietress being the most beautiful woman in Philadelphia.

One or two had retired from the table to the sideboard, and there was a chink of glasses there where the sparkling wine flowed freely.

The African presided at this particular feature, and almost the first low word Magic heard, as he came into the room arm in arm with Hammond, was:

"Yes, sah; all right. No change, sah!"

They advanced to the table, where some were sitting and others standing.

Quietly progressed the game.

The eyes of those who played were divided between the beautiful being dealing the cards and their bets on the deceiving table; their heads were turned or turning, and the silent countess, paying or taking in the bets, seemed to hold them in a thrall that was as a mesh of terrible enchantment.

Magic glanced at his companion.

The great auburn beard which Hammond wore concealed his face, but in his eyes there was a look of staring horror such as the detective had never, in all his experience, seen in human eyes before—a stare that dwelt on the countess wide and unwinking.

"Do you guess who she is?" asked Magic, leaning and whispering in Hammond's ear so lowly that no other could possibly hear.

And the answering whisper came:

"Great Heaven! How can it be? And yet it must be she! It is my Julia—it is Beryl Pearl!"

"Sh! Not so loud. But what of her hair?"

"That cannot deceive me. It is, as you said at your first intelligence to me of this abominable part she was assuming, all false. Ay, false as she herself is false—"

"Hush, I say! You will attract attention."

The young man seemed to arouse from his partial stupefaction.

Another feeling, a feeling of repugnance for the woman, despite her wondrous beauty, crept over him.

Within his breast arose a mighty struggle.

He fought to cast out then and there at once and forever the enchanting image that had formed the idol of his love.

Ah, it was a terrible struggle; not so easy to banish an affection such as his had grown to be.

For, while his manhood cried to him to renounce all that was in him for her, there rung deep down in his heart a bell-like voice that wailed:

"My love! My love! My love!"

He leaned again to his detective companion, whispering more guardedly than before.

"Tell me—do you not think that I have been a fool indeed?"

"Oh, I cannot say so. You have only been deceived, that's all. And besides, there may be some explanation for all this—"

"For all this?" interrupted Hammond, slyly leveling a finger toward the crowded table. "For this scene of vicious wickedness, where the once fair idol of my heart is seen with my own eyes duping, betraying, robbing the gullible and rash-headed scions of proud families. No, no, there cannot be any excuse for it. I hardly know whether to thank you for having opened my eyes to her born perfidy or to blame you for so shockingly having broken my once delicious dream."

He became fascinated while he riveted his gaze again upon the woman whom he knew in his aching lover-heart to be his past idol of worship.

Each movement of her tapering fingers, each silent gesture of the beautiful, proud head, each glance from the lustrous orbs as they roamed for transient instants around upon the little assemblage of players, contained a something that seemed to sink deeper and deeper into his shocked heart the stab that had smitten there upon the first discovery that confronted him in that mysterious room 20.

"Make your bets, gentlemen," said the melodiously-low voice of this serene and lovely woman, who occasionally deigned a smile at some player who was so fortunate as to win a bet.

And Hammond whispered to the detective:

"Yes, yes, it is she—her voice could never deceive me if all the rest of that wicked disguise could."

Then that strange and suspensive silence again, as the cards slowly, regularly, fatefully came sliding from the silver box, telling their tale of loss or gain to the card-maddened votaries.

Suddenly there was a commotion at the table.

"Come, come, old fellow, that's enough. What's the use in your sitting here and seeing your whole fortune melting away from you so foolishly? Come, I say. You've played enough—"

"Unhand me, I say. I am my own master. I shall play as long as I see fit—ay, as long as that lovely dealer is there!" answered another voice, rather loudly, and causing several to turn their glances momentarily upon him.

It was the young broker.

Thousands had gone from him in the short time that he had occupied a place at that fatal table.

But he played on, and on, and on, heedlessly.

He was thoroughly bewitched by the glorious loveliness of the countess: her silence, her graceful attitude as she sat there taking the money from himself and others through the ever one-sided working of the game, seemed to increase the passionate fires in his soul, of which he had appraised his partner.

Madly, wildly he drew his check for a large amount and handed it across for more of the round and tempting ivory chips.

"As long as that lovely dealer is there!" he had said.

But, though the glances of the players turned upon him in a little surprise, not a muscle of the countess's fair face moved, she did not raise her eyes; the game went on under her fingers so magically sliding the cards from their silver box.

CHAPTER XXVII.

HARPER AND FORCEPS UTTERLY "LEFT."

"PLEASE make your bets, gentlemen," said the even, musical voice of the countess.

A hand tugged at the sleeve of Magic.

He saw the disguised sergeant detective looking into his face in a way that plainly said:

"I want to speak with you."

They stepped toward the sideboard.

The African, at a word from the Russian-looking Eimenoff, proceeded to prepare two handsome juleps.

While this was in progress, Eimenoff said, in a tone that could not reach any other than that of his brother detective:

"You are right."

"Right—how?"

"In regard to the woman."

"What have you discovered that is new?"

Eimenoff related what he had overheard through his eavesdropping at the door of the countess's private room.

"She has completely confessed her identity, though she was not aware of having done so," he said, in conclusion.

"And you really heard all this?"

"Every word as I have narrated to you."

"Then I will exchange information."

"What have you discovered?"

"Something that it is strange you did not know before."

"What is it?"

"The Senor Juarez Ludoviq has been in Philadelphia for several days."

"The deuce he has!"

"He was stopping at the Continental. I went there to see him only this evening, but he had left for New York."

"One of us should pursue at once—"

"A moment," broke in Magic. "I would do so, and we may do so, but I have a little matter to fix straight here before I leave that young

man you see there standing and interested in the progress of the game."

"Young man?" as the sergeant looked in vain for the party to be supposedly designated particularly.

"Yes, the man you see with the auburn beard is in disguise. He is, or was a lover of the woman when she masqueraded under another name. This is a new and stunning revelation for him in connection with the woman he loved. As soon as he is satisfied, and has resolved to give her up for good and all, then we will take our steps. I do not think he is any longer enthralled by her wondrous charms. This night's sight-seeing will be enough for him, beyond doubt—"

At this juncture there was another commotion at the faro-table.

The young broker started from his seat, and his hand reached to the bosom of his shirt.

"I have still this left!" he cried, as he tried to wrench from the button-hole a magnificent diamond stud. "Give me more chips. I paid five hundred dollars for that stud. More chips!"

His partner had a hold upon his arm, a restraining hold that was endeavoring to drag him away from the table.

"Entwistle, come away! In Heaven's name, man, haven't you lost enough—"

"Ay, every dollar I have in the world. But let me alone. Luck must change presently; and you know I am no novice at this game."

"Come away, I say."

The hand that was held over the stud was grasped by a hand that was determined.

"Let my hand go," was the almost fierce ejaculation.

"Entwistle!" and there was sorrow and begging in the tone.

"Let me alone. I am my own master. Let me alone, I say!"

He released himself and dragged the glittering bauble from his shirt-front.

But again the hand of his anxious friend clasped him by the arm and a voice that was full of pain began to beg of him to desist in his madness.

Throughout, the countess never raised her glorious eyes.

It was the moment of a fresh deal.

Under her snowy fingers, the cards were being shuffled with an even, ratchety sound; her mien was as calm, as icy as if she was but an automaton.

But from the red lips came the words, calm as a summer's zephyr:

"Gentlemen, so much noise disturbs the game. I trust you will be kind enough to desist."

Into the box went the cards, and again came the silvery voice:

"Please make your bets."

The young broker wrenched himself free from the friendly gripe that was deterring him from further hazard.

And in the same moment the enormity of his losses seemed to strike with telling effect upon his brain, for he started toward the door staggering, crying as he went:

"Ruined!—ruined!—ruined!"

His friend followed.

But the sable attendant was before.

He slipped his arm into the arm of the half-blind, half-delirious player and assisted him from the fatal room.

More, he held upon the arm until he had shown the man the door which, in his blind frenzy, he seemed unable to find.

Then westward along Chestnut street sped a desperate form.

On, on, the young and ruined broker.

The lonely driver of a car that was crossing the bridge over the Schuylkill a short time thereafter, saw a man clamber upon the stone balustrade of the bridge beneath the brilliant gas-lamps that rayed there.

For one moment he was visible.

The driver took a quick turn around his break with the reins and started to intercept what was to his mind an evident attempt at suicide.

He was too late.

Out on the night air wafted a terrible cry.

The form disappeared over the balustrade into the black abyss below, and a silence that told of death prevailed.

Then the tinkle of the lonely car-bell sounded again, and the driver knew that some unfortunate had gone to a violent and self-inflicted death.

Meantime, the game in room No. 20 at "The Bachelors'" went on, as if nothing had occurred to mar the quietude of the assemblage there.

It was, as on the previous occasion, an early hour in the morning before the game stopped.

The countess, with an immense bag over her arm, bade her patrons *au revoir*, standing before the green-covered table that had wrested several thousand dollars from the players during the still hours of the night.

Eimenoff and the Southerner were the first to leave.

"What shall be our plan?" asked the former, who felt that the Baltimore detective was the leader in the matter.

I will see you after daylight and arrange,"

was the reply. "I have to see my friend off," as he motioned toward the disguised Hammond, who was following them along the upper hall.

Separating from Eimenoff, he joined the young man.

"Well, are you satisfied?"

"I am satisfied," was the reply, but the detective detected a peculiar intonation to the words which it was impossible to fathom.

At the door they parted—Hammond to return to the Continental, the detective to return to his luxurious room.

One by one the unfortunate players sought their rooms in the abode of "The Bachelors," all wiser men for the night's experience.

The countess was alone, save the presence of her sable attendant.

The African advanced to her and, after a cautious glance around, to make sure that they were alone, said:

"Mist'iss, dar's somethin' a-goin' on 'at isn't all right."

"What do you mean, Isaac?"

"I dunno, mist'iss. I isn't much at supposin' a argument. I on'y knows what I s'pects."

"Well, what do you suspect?"

"Dar's somethin' atween them yarr two men w'ot kem heyar as a Southe'n man an' as a Russian man."

"Ah?"

The countess started.

Perhaps her own keen eyes had discovered something to excite a suspicion in her mind; but this took no tangible shape until this moment in which the ignorant African seemed to have conceived the same idea.

"Dey's been a talkin' at de sideboard, mist'iss, when dey doesn't tink I was a listenin'. I knows dey was a-talkin' 'bout you, an' de feller w'ot was a-standin' by de table an' wasn't a-playin'. Unhunh! He was 'guised, he was."

"A man in disguise?"

"Unhunh!"

"And what did they say, Isaac?"

"Somethin' 'bout a man named Lud'viq—"

"Ah!" again from the red lips of the countess.

And she said, with utmost composure:

"It was only some private conversation, Isaac. It means nothing. I thank you for your watchfulness, however," and with which she swept out of the room, leaving him to extinguish the burners.

A startled look was in her face, though, as she hastened toward the room where the Indian woman, not yet gone to bed, awaited her coming.

Entering here and carefully closing the door, she exclaimed:

"Barbara, I am afraid the detectives that my terrible husband has set upon my track, have come dangerously close."

"What has happened, my mistress?"

"There has been a conversation in the faro-room about the Senor Juarez Ludoviq."

"How did you learn of it?"

"Through my faithful attendant there. The poor, ignorant fellow was not able to tell me much, but he evidently heard enough to make it an object for him to tell me that he supposed I had enemies, in the shape of disguised persons, loitering near. I did not stop to ask him for particulars."

"Your attendant was not wrong," said the woman.

"What do you mean, Barbara?" demanded she, suddenly.

"While you have been gone, my mistress, I have for a moment left the rooms. I picked up this paper in one of the lower rooms. Look at the place you see directly under my finger."

She held forth a paper.

Madame took it and glanced at the marked paragraph, which was the item of hotel arrivals.

The paper was two days old.

She saw there the name of Juarez Ludoviq as an arrivee at the Continental Hotel.

Her face paled momentarily.

Then, with a flush of feature, she said:

"Since we know where he is, we must act."

"We must act," supplemented the woman, significantly.

The train that steamed out from Broad and Prime streets, to make a connection with the New York train south, contained our two worthies, Harper and Forceps.

They were destined for Baltimore, where they arrived at an early hour in the morning—four o'clock, for that matter—at which time the Monumental City is generally wrapped in a desolate appearance, from the eastern to the western section.

They went to Guy's; but there was no sleep for these two precious rogues, who had determined that, if they could not get money from the hunted woman in one way, they would get it in another.

Wide awake were they, and indulging in free potations at the bar as they waited for the morning to open its business-hours at the City Hall.

As Big Sam struck the hour of eight they started forth with a confidence that they were

soon to reap a great harvest from the important information they were able to give.

At the office of the police-marshal, however, Harper assumed an entirely different air from the one that had marked his entrance into the private-detective agency in Philadelphia.

He doffed his hat in a very respectful manner, and was imitated by Forceps.

Both knew well the quick disposition of the Baltimore authorities, and that they would not be trifled with, to the slightest degree, in a matter of business.

"Well, gentlemen, what is it?" inquired the marshal, politely.

"We've come," said Harper, with a forced control upon himself, "to ask if you or your officers want to haul in that twenty thousand dollars that is offered for the apprehension of the woman who robbed the Senor Ludoviq, of New Orleans, of a million of diamonds?"

At the moment of the entrance of Harper and Forceps, there had been a person in conversation with the marshal—a man who wore a slouch hat, and who evidently was on very familiar terms with the marshal, for he had not removed his hat; and under the rim of the hat were a pair of very shrewd and dark eyes that bent on the comers, as their owner moved his chair back to give the visitors a chance to address the official.

"You know, of course, about the case?" put Harper, before the marshal could speak in reply to his speech.

"Oh, you are alluding to the romantic account of a woman named Borgia, eh?"

"That's the very one."

"Well, gentlemen?"

"You would like to scoop in that twenty thousand, wouldn't you? You are paying for information that is valuable, ain't you?"

"Yes, we pay for everything that we can use—sometimes more and sometimes less. What do you know about the woman?"

"I know enough to put my hand on her within a few hours."

"Indeed?"

"You bet," here uttered Forceps, involuntarily.

"Well, gentlemen, if you can find or place in the power of the police, the person of Borgia, the Faro Queen, why do you not do so? You will get a good reward from the Senor Ludoviq."

Harper hitched uneasily in his chair.

Forceps did more than this.

He had discovered in the party who sat at a short distance from the marshal, the chief of the police detectives of Baltimore—a man who had, two years previous, bagged him for a larceny and seen to his sending over between the trees at Jones's Falls. He was wishing himself out of the office, and averted his head, as if to avoid recognition by those keen eyes.

"Well, that isn't exactly the shape we want it in," Harper said, a little restlessly. "We can show you the woman, and no mistake; but for reasons, we don't want to figure in the consequences. We want to make a bargain."

"Oh, you want to make a bargain?"

"Yes."

And after a nudge from Forceps, he added:

"Will you pay us five thousand of the twenty that I know is up for a reward, if we show you exactly where the woman is, so that you can bag her without any mistake?"

As the proposition came forth, the quiet man who sat near the marshal slipped a piece of paper into the official's hand.

It was a telegram.

Instantly upon reading it, he answered:

"I wouldn't give you ten cents for your information, my friends, and that's a fact."

"You wouldn't?" exclaimed the astounded Harper.

"No."

"Why, look a-here," with a slight bluster,

"I can give it to the Philadelphia detectives—"

"But we have it already," and the marshal, smiling, waved the telegram before their eyes in such a manner that it conveyed the significance without giving them the points.

The telegram was from Magic to his chief.

It announced that Borgia, the Faro Queen, was then under his surveillance to a dead certainty.

Harper and Forceps gazed for an instant blankly at the smiling official, then they gazed at one another.

They realized that the telegram so fully yet cautiously exhibited must be from the man they had had all their trouble with in Philadelphia—the detective who had outwitted them at every turn; and here he was interfering once more with their little plan to raise the wind!

A most unfortunate time, too; for, counting upon effecting a bargain to a certainty with the Baltimore detective force, they had been rather lavish with the sparse funds on hand, and their mutual purse then was in a woeful condition.

Disgust, as well as chagrin, was plainly depicted in their two roguish faces.

And the smile of the marshal seemed to add gall to the barb of disappointment that struck them here, on the verge of their last resort.

"I guess we might as well be going," suggested Harper, nudging his companion.

"Good-day, gents," the official said, quietly. "When you have raked up any further information that is ahead of us, drop around—pleased to see you."

"You be durned!" growled Forceps, though not loud enough to reach the ears of the one for whom it was intended, as he and Harper hurried to the sidewalk.

"What's to be done now?" he interrogated, in a sort of dismay.

"Try a last dodge."

"Last dodge? Haven't we just tried our last dodge? And hasn't it busted sky-high?"

"Come along and listen," and as they went, Harper unfolded a new and bold plot that brought a smile of solace to the face of Forceps.

They made toward the Union Station, and with the remnant of their money bought tickets for Philadelphia.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"LAY YOUR HAND ON HER IF YOU DARE!"

EARLY on the following morning Mark Magic arose and descended the stairs at "The Bachelors," entering the parlors and apparently awaiting the appearance of madame.

Eimenoff was not far behind.

He made his appearance within a few minutes after the Baltimore detective had taken a seat at the window through which wafted a sweet perfume from the garden.

The sergeant carried a small sachel.

"You are all ready, I perceive," remarked Magic.

"Yes, I shall take the first train from the West Philadelphia depot."

"Make your moves quick over there," Magic suggested, "for from what I can imagine of this Senor Ludoviq, he is a quick mover. If you expect to come up with him, you must be spry."

"I guess I can meet the case. I know about where such rich bugs as he can be found. Good-by."

The two sleuths shook hands cordially, and the sergeant started away on his errand to overtake the erratic Senor Ludoviq.

Probably half an hour after this, the countess descended the stairs.

It was an unusually early hour for her to make her appearance, and Magic noticed that her beautiful face was wearing a rather weary look.

She exchanged a few words with her sable and omnipresent African attendant who was then in the hall.

When through, and before she could proceed toward the basement stairs, which was her evident intention, Magic accosted her in a polite manner, saying:

"Good-morning, countess."

"Ah, Mr. Gorsuch. You too are up early this morning. I hope you slept well last night, and that the unpleasant episode of room 20 did not interfere with your pleasant dreams?"

"Oh, I have seen such things before, madame. We Southerners are used to witnessing despairing swains like that, you must remember. I have seen men cast themselves headlong from a Mississippi steamboat at losses not so large as was the case with our young friend last night."

"I hope he was persuaded by my servant, Isaac, to retire to his room."

"And so do I, madame. But—are you engaged particularly?"

"Engaged? Why do you ask?"

Magic was proceeding with a plan he had in view as if it was the most commonplace matter in the world.

"Because, if you are not, I shall be very glad to have a few minutes' private conversation with you."

"And I shall be happy to grant it, Mr. Gorsuch," with one of her sweetest smiles. "But you must first excuse me while I send an order to my private kitchen," and she tapped the bell on the pillar at the foot of the staircase.

The same messenger boy, attired like a senate page, appeared.

To him, in a tone that prevented Magic hearing what was said, she gave an order.

As the boy started to obey his instructions, she turned to the Southerner, saying:

"I am now at leisure, Mr. Gorsuch."

She swept gracefully into the parlor.

He gallantly placed a chair for her.

Before seating herself, madame went to the window, drawing aside the costly curtains to admit more light.

The picture of the garden, so very delightful at the moment, seemed to rivet her for an instant, and the fall of the plashing fountain entered the room in a whispery sound that added to the surrounding of magnificence which seemed to prevail in every breath that pervaded the house.

Turning away at last, and accepting the seat that he had placed for her, she said:

"I hope you do not mean to announce your departure, Mr. Gorsuch. You have not yet finished the week for which you have paid me—"

"I do not mean, madame, to speak of anything like that," he interrupted, in a courteous

manner. "What I have to say is, nevertheless, of a business character."

"Ah."

Though Mark Magic was a detective—though he was one who had, in all his professional career, been accustomed to coming to points with a short business abruptness, he paused before proceeding with what he had to say to this entrancing woman.

The circumstances were peculiar.

He knew not whether he was speaking to a willful criminal; he had no ground for dealing with her in the matter of the Senor Ludoviq in a harsh manner—though he would not have hesitated for an instant had the circumstances of the case required or warranted it.

To the contrary, he now—after knowing that he was dealing with one of the most mysterious women who had ever come under his immediate notice—desired to go about what he had resolved upon in such a way that if there was anything more to be learned, he would learn it.

He meant to corner her and sift the mystery of Borgia, the Faro Queen, to its very bottom!

And as he hesitated, drawing a chair for himself, the countess added, composedly:

"What can the business be, Mr. Gorsuch?"

"Strictly in relation to yourself, madame. And to begin with, I will clear away a little deception I have practiced toward you," saying which, he made an adroit movement which removed the mustache, and otherwise revealed that his disguise as a Southerner was assumed.

He stood before her in his undoubted person as Mark Magic, the Baltimore detective.

If he had expected to see any betrayal sign of alarm on the part of the beautiful woman, he was mistaken.

She simply gazed in surprise.

"You have seen me before, madame."

"I?—never!" she exclaimed.

And she added, with a tinge of displeasure:

"Mr. Gorsuch, what does this mean? I received you into my house as a gentleman. What have you been masquerading here for?"

A woman of nerve was she.

But she was dealing with an old sleuth.

Magic was not to be bluffed.

"You ask me why I have been masquerading here?"

"I do."

The tone of the countess was cold and haughty.

"I will tell you," said Magic drawing a little closer. "I have not been thrown off the scent, as you supposed, when you gave me that part true and part false tale at Washington square a few nights ago. I know you, Julia Diering—I know you, Beryl Pearl—I know you, Borgia, the Faro Queen!"

And as he uttered the words, though low and quiet, he fastened on her a look that had on more than one previous occasion transfixed a criminal.

A wave of whiteness swept over the face of the countess.

"I do not understand you, sir."

"You deny that you are Julia Diering, *alias* Beryl Pearl, better known in New Orleans as Borgia?"

"What can you be talking about—'Sh!" the last as the page entered the room, bringing a morning paper.

For after the arrival of the Indian woman, madame had resolved to see and read the paper regularly.

As her lustrous eyes glanced down at the prominent headings on the first page, she said, calmly:

"Mr. Gorsuch, have you taken leave of your senses this morning, or have you not yet gotten over your partaking of the wine in which I saw you indulge at the sideboard last night?"

"Madame, I am a detective, and you know it—"

"A detective!" elevating her glance in assumed surprise.

"Yes, and I have followed you from Baltimore, as you also know. But I did not dream at the outset to what the trail would lead me. You will find me to be a man who thoroughly understands his business. I am about to win the twenty thousand dollars reward that is offered for your discovery by the Senor Juarez Ludoviq—"

At this juncture the countess interrupted by a long and peculiar laugh that checked him.

"What is that you are about to do?" she exclaimed, merrily.

"I have stated what I shall do. I hope you will not give me additional trouble. I arrest you—for I know that you are Julia Diering—you are Beryl Pearl—you are Borgia, the Faro Queen, for whom the senor is offering a large reward—"

The laugh again broke in upon his speech.

"Since you know so much, perhaps you ought to know more. I am glad that you have shown me your true profession—coward and spy that you are!" with a little fire in the words that came from the red lips. "And I will give you a little information that may surprise even you, a detective. Ha, ha, ha!" she laughed, almost harshly now. "You have played a smart game for nothing, I can assure you. From whom will you derive the reward for my apprehen-

sion? For I will admit that I am Borgia, the Faro Queen, as you term her. From whom will you receive this magnificent reward? Ha, ha, ha! From the Senor Ludoviq? Oh, you are mistaken! Look at that—" rising and pushing the paper before his eyes as she uttered the last words with an accent that was almost a hiss. "Look at that, sir, and see if you are as smart as you have thought yourself!"

Involuntarily Magic took the paper and cast his eyes over a paragraph that headed the latest morning's intelligence.

This paragraph, with a flaring head, was an account of a railroad accident that had occurred to the midnight train out of West Philadelphia on the night gone.

The train had hardly cleared the entanglement of endless frogs and switches at West Philadelphia when the accident transpired; there were two deaths and several passengers badly wounded.

Of the two that had been killed, one was—Senor Juarez Ludoviq!

Certain papers found on the body of this gentleman indicated who he was, and it was supposed that he had been either at the time of the catastrophe standing on the platform or was on his way to the smoking-car.

He had been killed, it would have appeared, by being hurled from the platform to the ground when the engineer was getting up speed, and his skull had been found to bear such a cut and recognizable imprint as would have been made by contact with one of the long, acute angled frogs that there abounded.

The countess watched the face of the detective as he read.

Her beautiful face wore an expression of commingled derision and defiance.

"You will hardly collect your reward, sir, I apprehend," she said, sarcastically, as Magic refolded the paper and extended it to her with a quiet bow.

"If this account be true, madame, I may not be able to reap the reward for my trouble. But unless I am greatly mistaken, there is by this time—through the action of Senor Ludoviq before his death—a charge against you before the New Orleans authorities for an assault upon him with intent to murder. Of course, I shall arrest you to answer to that charge."

For a moment she paled; then she was herself again, saying:

"When you have shown me the warrant for such an arrest—you who are not even a detective of the city of Philadelphia—and when the requisition papers are ready, I will make no objection to accompanying you, sir."

Magic was being baffled.

He had no warrant.

In this trail, so very blind at first, he had not paused to weigh the expediency of having the paper in his possession.

At that instant Eimenoff, who had started in pursuit of the Senor Ludoviq, came hurriedly into the entry, valise in hand and strode to the parlors.

He had heard a portion of the speech of the countess.

As he came in he said, sternly:

"But you will find that I have the warrant, madame!"

And turning to Magic, he added:

"Fortunately, the moment I learned from you who it was we were piping, I secured the necessary document. Here it is."

Then again to the countess, who was for an instant transfixed by this turn in affairs:

"I arrest you, madame, for an attempt to murder the Senor Ludoviq—"

He was interrupted by a striding form that entered the room and gained the beautiful woman's side.

"Lay your hand on her if you dare!"

The countess uttered a glad cry.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A TRUE LIFE SECRET.

THIS unexpected comer was Harold Hammond.

Instantly the countess leaned upon him for support, one of her beautifully rounded arms being inserted in his, and her other hand resting confidently upon his shoulder.

Hammond glared upon the detectives.

"You will not arrest this lady, gentlemen, if you will pause to consider for a moment."

"Why will we not?" demanded Eimenoff, spiritedly.

"Because your own judgment will show you that there will be no witness against the lady for the crime of which she is charged. The Senor Ludoviq, I see by the paper, is dead—and through no doing of hers. Who, then, will sustain this charge that she attempted his life—when it may be a question whether she really did do as he charged?"

Magic left it for the Philadelphia detective to manage in this little complication.

Eimenoff was not to be easily deterred when he knew that he had the legal document in his pocket for the arrest of the woman before him.

"A discussion of the points in the case, sir," he said, sharply, to Hammond, "are not in my line. I only say I have a warrant for her arrest, and arrested she shall be. There is no

evidence that she did not attempt to commit murder, while there is a direct charge to that effect—"

"It is a lie!" exclaimed another voice from the doorway.

Barbara, the Indian woman strode forward, her black, bead-like eyes flashing upon the two men who confronted the countess.

"A lie, I say, and I can prove it."

Even the countess stared at Barbara at these bold words.

"My mistress did shoot the senor," she said. "And the pity is that she did not kill him. If you once knew her history, you would extend to her the right hand of friendship instead of trying to be her persecutors, and say, with me, that the senor well deserved death at her hands. Listen—hear me swear to you—that my mistress fired to kill the senor in pure self-defense! For had she not been as quick as she was, she would have been herself cruelly murdered by him on that night in New Orleans!" and as she made the assertion, her beady eyes were filled with a marvelous fire.

Turning to Madame de Puillier, she said:

"In this pass, my mistress, why do you not tell your whole and truthful story?"

"We've had several stories from her, my good woman," here said Magic, significantly.

"But not her true history—you sleuths! Behold in her a woman who has suffered a wrong that would have justified the killing of a dozen Senors Ludoviq. Will you hear what she can tell you, and then judge for yourselves?"

"How are we to believe anything from the lips of one who can invent a history as fast as she can speak it?" suggested Magic.

Here said the countess:

"Gentlemen, if you will hear me, I will speak the plain truth and nothing but the truth. As this woman—my faithful servant says—I should be willing, after that, to leave a judgment of myself to your own minds. Will you hear?"

Magic and Eimenoff exchanged glances.

Each seemed to be of the same thinking.

They would like to follow the mystery of this lovely being to its utmost ending.

"I think we will hear what you have to say," responded Magic.

"Be seated, then."

There was not now the least excitement in the scene.

The countess, still retaining her confiding hold on the arm of Harold Hammond, walked toward an easy-chair.

The two detectives seated themselves near, while Barbara took a position by the side of her mistress in a devoted manner.

"You have read," madame went on to say, "that the Senor Ludoviq first met me in London, in a gambling *salon*, where I presided at the table and was as much of an attraction for the place as the fascination of the game itself. Ah, that is but an invention of the senor's. I never saw a card manipulated in such a manner as in the game of *faro*, until I unfortunately wedded with that man."

"I was no *faro* queen; I was but a simple and"—with some hesitation—"and pretty girl, gentlemen. The senor, during his travels, came face to face with me and conceived a great passion for me. I was then but an humble flower-girl, I swear to you! My parents were very poor, and my father a cripple. The support of the family depended upon my sales of the flowers, which I vended on commission."

"The senor made rapid love to me, offering me, truly and honorably, his heart and hand. I was dazzled by his wealth, though I was shy of his offer, suspecting treachery from the first. But when he came straight to my poor parents and made known his desire for an honorable marriage, they at once consented to the suit and advised me to accept. He would place them above all possibility of want, he promised; and in this he was true, for he endowed them bounteously."

"We were married. But, somehow, the acquisition of wealth did not turn my head; there was nothing giddy after that in my way, such as might have been expected of a girl lifted comparatively from the streets to a position that lords and ladies might envy as far as wealth was concerned. Instead, there seemed to settle a pall of dread upon my heart from the very hour in which I exchanged vows with him before the priest."

"This dread was all too soon to have its realization. I had not been married for a longer period than a month, when I discovered that my husband, instead of being a great personage in his own country, Brazil, was rather an out-cast, and his immense wealth was acquired, and was still being acquired, by robbing people through the fatal means of the *faro*-table."

"My fullest realization of how I had sold myself came to me when he announced one day that it was time for me to begin taking lessons in the career that was to be allotted to both of us. I was ignorant of his meaning. But he soon enlightened me. He said I was one of the beautiful women in the kingdom. It would be a pity to let my charms slumber when they might be turned to advantage in drawing a greater crowd to the tables he had opened in

London. I, silly thing! in a half-terror, yielded to his instructions, and in a short time was fully familiar with the game. Then he taught me how to manipulate the cards as a dealer. But the climax of my silently-borne misery came when he declared that he must flee from London to avoid arrest and imprisonment. My name had already begun to figure in the gambling *salon*. The discovery of my being assistant to the villainous proceedings proved a death-stroke to my aged parents.

"After that, life became a sort of desperate existence to me and perhaps I entered into his wickedness with reprehensible readiness. We came to New Orleans. Here we began the career that ended in his death—a death that, as this woman says, and which is true, as I hope for future salvation, was brought about through my defense of my own life at the time.

"The senor, I had long noticed, had grown tired of my charms and, after shadowing him, I discovered that he was enamored of a Creole in that city. I said nothing, but secretly wondered where it would end. I observed that at times he would regard me strangely, and once overheard him mutter that he would sooner or later find a means to get rid of me without the assistance of the courts. I became alarmed. I purchased and carried ever after that a reliable weapon which was never absent from my pocket, and which I placed convenient to my pillow at night. I really believed that the Brazilian designed murdering me!

"I was not wrong in my suspicion. On the night that the terrible scene occurred in the *salon* where I was dealing the cards, I saw a demoniac expression come over his dark features. He gave a hurried glance around at the combatants. Then he drew a revolver and turned upon me with a look I shall never forget. He hissed exultantly: 'Now then, I can be rid of you forever and nobody the wiser in this scene!' He was cocking the revolver and in another moment would assuredly have slain me. But I was too quick for him. I had my own weapon out in a twinkling. It was a self-cocking revolver. As I drew it, I fired, hardly pausing for an aim; but the bullet, I think, entered his head, as the account in the papers says, which you have read.

"I believed that I had killed him. I fled, having first gotten together all that we mutually possessed in diamonds—a method of investment we had adopted upon first coming to America. You now have the exact circumstances of the case, gentlemen, and, ah, I am so weary with this everlasting life that has been a hunted life, that I am ready to do whatever you require. Take me to New Orleans if you will; I am weary, I say—I want to be either dead myself or released from this incubus that makes my life a misery by night and by day—"

"But, madame," said Magic, as she paused with the sentence seemingly half-finished, "if you only had a witness to the latter circumstance—the act of the senor which made you do the shooting, as you say, in self-defense—then it would be an easy matter for you to clear yourself of the charge wholly."

"There is a witness!"

All eyes turned upon the Indian woman, who had uttered the emphatic words.

"The witness is here—in me!" she added. "I—I saw it all!"

The declaration was a surprise even to madame.

"Ah," Barbara continued, "I too had seen those black looks and threatening scowls upon the brow of the Senor Ludovig. I was deeply attached to my mistress, who had ever treated me with gentleness and favor. I was watching, though she knew it not. I was at a panel door, not five feet behind the senor when that scene of combat took place in the gambling-room. I had a weapon leveled at the senor, to kill him before he could kill my beloved mistress. But she was quicker, and I breathed a fervent thanks to Heaven that she was saved through her own action in time. To this I can and will swear."

Still Eimenoff would not wholly relinquish the case.

"You say, madame, that you are willing to go to New Orleans without putting us to the trouble of obtaining a requisition?"

"I am."

And as Hammond would have uttered a sharp objection, she added, with a gentle pressure upon his steadying arm:

"Nay, Harold, it is best. Do not place any impediment in the way of these gentlemen. I am not crushed; I am not fearful at all. What I have said is true: what Barbara has said I know must be true also, for Barbara would not lie, I believe, even to save my life."

"I would not lie," exclaimed the woman, impressively.

And thus it was arranged that on the ensuing night the two detectives, with the beautiful woman, should take their departure for the South, and for the scene of the tragedy of a year past.

Hammond expressed his determination to accompany the woman for whom his love had flamed out despite all that he had learned and

all that he had seen to at first cause a waver in his fidelity toward her.

"When you are free—and you must soon be so," he had said, "you will not do this any more, Beryl? I mean that you will banish forever from your life this—this horrible business at the faro-table?"

"Yes, Harold. For it has been no more than a part of the desperate career that I have been forced to live since the time when I fled from New Orleans and the man who sought my life. I will devote myself all to you and to your love, dear Harold, if you can still love, still take me, after what you have seen and learned of me."

"I love you, Beryl; through all, I say I love you."

During the absence of the countess, "The Bachelors" continued its legitimate business under competent managers, which she was fortunate enough to secure on short notice.

At the end of a month she was back again.

It had not required much to prove that she had done what she did in self-defense; and the party who had been found by the wily senor to testify that he saw the woman, Borgia, deliberately fire the nearly fatal shot, confessed that he had been bought to give such testimony.

Fortunately for him, he was saved the grave offense of perjury; indeed, he made a clean breast of it when a hearing was held in an informal manner in regard to the case.

And ere she set out for her return to Philadelphia, Beryl Pearl—for that was her proper name—had arranged satisfactorily to soon take formal possession of the residue of her husband's wealth in New Orleans, which was considerable.

Mark Magic, before he separated from the couple who were soon to be wedded, to report briefly to his chief, received from Hammond the reward promised for the finding of Julia Diering, and he parted from them with the most friendly feelings on both sides.

Eimenoff would have been somewhat "left" had it not been for the fact that Magic generously shared with him what he received from the young lover.

The Baltimore detective returned and remained in Philadelphia to attend the wedding, which was to transpire at "The Bachelors" with considerable pomp.

Every vestige of the faro paraphernalia had been banished from room 20—indeed, from the house altogether.

Into the life of Beryl Pearl had come at last a succession of sunny happinesses, and her beautiful face seemed to grow more beautiful than ever in anticipation of the night so near at hand, when she should confide herself to the keeping of an honorable man whom she had dearly loved throughout.

The eventful day—the eventful night—arrived.

Magnificent before, "The Bachelors" seemed to acquire a wondrous appearance on this occasion, when Hammond and the lovely Beryl Pearl were to be united in marriage.

Musicians were present, and their instruments filled the parlors with grand strains, that wafted out upon Chestnut street like sounds from a sleepily fairy-like realm.

The guests of the house, which by that time had every room taken, and others of their friends whom they invited, filled the spacious rooms below, and promenaded expectantly in the hall or chatted subduedly at the vine-clad windows.

Then, when the exact moment arrived, all eyes were riveted upon a being of almost unearthly grandeur, who entered on the arm of an invited friend to meet the groom before the holy man.

An impressive service was read.

The two were husband and wife.

Then were thrown open the great doors of the adjacent rooms, where a banquet was spread that might have tempted the palates of the gods.

The upper portion of the house was totally deserted.

Alone on the lounge in the private rooms of Beryl lay the little fellow, her child, sleeping soundly, innocently, while this scene of happiness and mirthful hilarity prevailed below.

Alone and unwatched.

And there came a peering face at the long window opening on the short balustrade, where the old vines, tough and strong, grew high from the ground.

Following the face, a form; and then, on tip-toe, a man leaped into the room.

It was the ex-burglar, Forceps.

He cast quick and searching glances around, going to the door and even looking along the brilliant hall toward the landing at the head of the broad stairs.

No one was near.

"A clear coast this time!" he muttered, in satisfaction. "And now for the prize. You will find, woman, that we are not to be so easily deprived of our booty as you imagined."

He unwrapped from around his waist a long, slender and strong rope.

Then he produced a broad plaster from his pocket.

Gliding forward to the lounge, he paused for just one moment.

In the next instant, he had slapped and pressed the plaster tightly over the child's mouth.

The little fellow, roused from his peaceful slumber thus rudely, stared up with terrified orbs at the wicked-visaged man who bent over him.

CHAPTER XXX.

LIKE THE FADING OF A VISION.

FORCEPS, with a jubilant glitter in his wicked orbs, lost no time in binding the child's arms in such a manner that the latter could not tear away the plaster which was over his mouth to prevent any outcry.

The eyes of little Willie were turned piteously upward upon the rough man—piteously and in terror.

But the ex-burglar minded it not.

He had a terrible object in view.

Having made the child secure, and rendered any further struggle on his part impossible, he took an additional knotty turn upon one end of the long rope around his little captive's body.

Raising the child in his arms, he started toward the window.

"Now, then," burst from his lips, sibilantly, "let us see whether the blooming countess will not come down handsomely for the return of her child—"

"Why, you haven't got him yet!"

A cry that was a furious curse broke from Forceps.

The quiet words had intercepted him at the moment he was on the point of lowering the infant over the sill to some one evidently in waiting below.

"Don't be in such a hurry to count your chickens, friend Forceps—they are not hatched yet!"

Calm and smiling, Mark Magic confronted him in the doorway.

The detective had a gleaming revolver leveled at the villain's breast with a steady hand.

"Carry that child back to the lounge, Forceps, before this little pop-gun takes a notion to go off."

The tone of command was one that meant business.

Forceps saw that if he hesitated, he would certainly be shot down promptly.

With an expression of countenance that was indescribable in its wrath, he complied.

He did not, indeed, could not, speak at the instant, so overwhelming were the rageful passions of his disappointed heart.

"Take that nasty plaster off his mouth, Forceps, and untie him. Be quick, now."

Again the command was obeyed.

Then the ruffian, with a bold desperation, wheeled upon the cool-mannered detective.

"They call you Little Magic," he snarled, "an' blast me if I don't believe there must be something magic about you, the way you turn up at the wrong time—"

"The wrong time for your little games, you mean, eh, Forceps? Oh, that's only my business, no more. It lends a spice to the variety, you know. Hold out your hands, Forceps."

"My hands?"

"Hold them out," sternly.

The villain extended his wrists.

He well knew what was meant.

With a quick step forward, and in a lightning-like adroitness, Magic clicked a pair of handcuffs on the wrists of the ex-burglar.

"Guess I'll have to cage you this time, Forceps."

"Cage an' be durned, then. I don't care!"

"That's right. I don't like to see a man take his troubles too much to heart," rejoined the detective lightly.

And he demanded:

"Who is with you, Forceps?"

"Ain't anybody with me—can't you see for yourself?"

"Oh, come. I mean, who was it you meant to lower that child down to below the window—somebody, you know," with an accent of mock persuasion.

Forceps seemed to suddenly resolve that if he was destined for limbo, he would not go alone.

"Harper's down there," he said.

"Under the window?"

"Yes."

With his left hand, while he kept Forceps under the muzzle of the revolver with his right, Magic had been feeling of the other's garments, to see whether he carried any weapons.

Depriving him of a revolver which he found in the hip pocket, he took a firm hold on the collar of the ex-burglar, saying:

"Come along with me, now, Forceps, and don't make any more fuss than the law allows under the circumstances."

"You're a cool one at this biz, anyhow."

"Oh, I'm educated to it, you see. Come on."

With a firm hold on the collar of his captive, Magic started from the room.

At the threshold he met the woman, Barbara.

"What is this? What has happened?" she demanded, anxiously, and at once hastening to the child, who, in a sort of awe, had not yet begun to cry.

"You came near losing your precious charge by your momentary negligence, my good woman, that's all. Come on, Forceps," and the detective, with his prisoner at his side, left the apartment.

Straight down the staircase he went.

But the occasion of attraction was now all in the banquet hall; no one was present to ask questions in regard to the singular sight—only one, and he the very person Magic desired to see at that moment.

The sergeant detective.

"Why, what have you got there?" queried the sergeant.

"A fellow whom I caught in the act of abducting the child of the bride."

And Magic explained briefly what had transpired in the upper room, concluding with:

"Take charge of him for a few minutes, sergeant. I am after his pal in the garden."

Turning Forceps over to the stout Philadelphia detective, Magic slipped quickly out into the garden and toward the spot beneath the window of the upper chamber.

As he had been advised, here he encountered the man Harper.

A short struggle ensued.

But the Baltimore detective soon had his prisoner safe, with the stout wristlets clicked upon his wrists.

"I think this will about wind you up, won't it, friend Harper?"

"Who in thunder are you, anyhow?"

"Mark Magic, at your service. I have had a pretty close eye on you ever since the night of our little sparring match on the boat around from Baltimore."

"Curse the luck! I thought from the first—an' told Forceps so—that you were a detective an' that we'd have trouble from you before we were through."

"A very reliable prophecy it was, Harper. Come right along now; your friend Forceps is waiting for you inside. You two will be excellent company for one another when we get you to boarding at Moyamensing."

Another and deeply-intoned oath escaped the lips of Harper as he fully realized his prospects for a term in prison.

Harper and Forceps were speedily carried off to the station-house, there to await the charges which Magic was prepared to make; and it was not long thereafter that his promise of getting them into Moyamensing was fulfilled.

The two ruffians thus melted ignominiously out of the life of the woman they had hunted and haunted so persistently.

Magic remained long enough in Philadelphia to see to the conviction of the evil pair, and then departed for Baltimore, with pressing invitation from the bride and groom to call upon them whenever he might be in the city.

Reporting to his chief after the termination of the rather singular trail, he said:

"You started me out on a blind. Have I earned my wager that I could make a case out of nothing but a transient suspicion?"

"You have, Magic, and have right well earned the reward."

For the Baltimore detective had come back richer by twenty-five hundred dollars.

The mystery of the millinery store on South Sixth street always remained a mystery, except to the authorities, who were duly and fully advised of the strange history of the beautiful woman; and considering the position which was soon to become hers among the high social circles of Philadelphia, the detail of the explanation was never given to the public.

Hammond and his lovely bride long continued "The Bachelors," until finally, at his urging, the establishment, grown marvelously successful, was sold out at a high figure and they started for a tour abroad.

Just before their departure, a pale, emaciated young man called upon them, and Beryl recognized the young broker who had been driven to madness by his losses on that (to him) terrible night. He did not perish, by a miracle, after that wild plunge into the waters of the Schuylkill. He was found floating downward with the tide by a party in a boat, and when brought ashore life was found to be not yet extinct. He was tenderly cared for; though for a long time it was a serious question as to whether he would recover his reason.

The experience had effectually cured him of his passion for the treacherous game of faro.

Beryl offered to restore the amount he had lost if he could name it. But this he refused to accept, saying that it should remain a monument of reminder to him as long as he lived.

Many of the gentlemen from "The Bachelors" went over to New York to see the couple off on their foreign journey, and as the massive thing of iron steamed down the harbor, there faded from the gaze of well-wishing friends—and from you, my reader—the vision of a strangely beautiful woman with a remarkable career.

THE END.

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